HALF-LIFE 2 STRATEGY: EXCLUSIVE TIPS FROM VALVE SOFTWARE

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Contents

PC GAMER

THE WORLD'S BEST-SELLING PC GAMES MAGAZINE

Age of Empires III

30

FEATURES

EXCLUSIVE!

30
AGE OF EMPIRES III

The granddaddy of all epic historical RTS games is back, and more glorious than ever. Join us as we uncover the never-before-seen secrets behind Ensemble Studios' "revolutionary" take on the conquest of the Americas. You'll remember why history was your favorite subject in high school!

SCOOPS

16
STUBBS THE ZOMBIE

Zombies have feelings, too, and not just the urge to consume human flesh. We've got an in-depth look at how you can take part in the Zombie Apocalypse, wreaking havoc on human civilization as Stubbs the Zombie. It's Bill Harms' (and any horror fan's) dream game!

SCOOPS

18
HANDS-ON PLAYTEST

We don our capes and very-tight tights to get the world-exclusive playtest of *Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich*. Chuck doesn't take any sass from Nazis as he puts his feet into the boots of the crimefighting Freedom Force team. Find out how this follow-up fares against its fantastic forebear!

STRATEGY

98
HALF-LIFE 2 STRATEGY

No one knows a game like its developer, so we tapped the makers of *Half-Life 2* for their exclusive tips, tricks, secrets, and solutions. Revel in the full brilliance of the year's best shooter, armed with the insider info that'll let you get the absolute most out of the game.

ON THE CD

Kneel before the glory of this month's disc! Behold: demos of *Children of the Nile* and *Zoo Tycoon 2*; seven unbearably good Reflexive mini-games; a magnificent *DragonShard* trailer; and an exclusive *Jump to Lightspeed* strategy!

10 LETTERS
Thoughts on *Half-Life 2* keep pouring in... Hear from those who hated it; those who hate Steam; those who hate us; those who love us; and those who love the game. It's a perfect circle of nigh-infinite proportions!

24 EYEWITNESS
For the love of Gandhi, why can't we have great games without conflicts between developers and publishers? We explore the often-uneasy relationship between the two sides. Plus: a peek at the emerging world of gaming art, and the blogs you need to read.

80 HARD STUFF
It's a peripheral frenzy once more as TheVede passes his irrefutable judgment on two gaming mice and a new set of Logitech speakers. Voodoo's also in the house: we review their new Envy laptop and give you the chance to win a decked-out Voodoo SLi PC!

92 EXTENDED PLAY
This month we showcase some of the best user-made maps for *Max Payne 2*, and highlight a new *Spider-Man* mod for *Quake III*.

94 ALTERNATE LIVES
Not all RPG fans are so eager to jump on the MMO bandwagon. Desslock gives soloers a few reasons to hope for the future.

94 THE WARGAMER
Mark finds another gem in the often-overlooked sea of wargames — this time in HEXWAR. Follow him to grognard nirvana.

96 SIM COLUMN
Sometimes you just want to take your simulated plane for a little fly-and-bomb. Saddle up with Andy as he lets loose his frustrations in fine virtual fashion.

96 KILLING BOX
Chuck takes a look at some products that promise to enhance your (gaming) performance and experience. Saucy!

104 BACKSPACE
In the battle between *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2*, one columnist has made up his mind.

Letter from the Editor

"BUY THE TICKET, TAKE THE RIDE."

It's not every month that you get to unveil the next *Age of Empires* game, but luckily for us, that month is this one. Ensemble Studios threw open their doors and let us dig into their long-simmering masterpiece of Revolution-era real-time strategy — so we got to see "history in the making," if you'll excuse the pun.

This issue also brings you a unique treat from the hallways of Valve Software. As we played through *Half-Life 2*, we guessed that the developers must have a treasure trove of tips and tricks for the game — a repertoire of delights that we humble gamers could mainly just guess at. Turns out we were right. And happily, we were able to convince Valve to part with the company secrets and help us craft this month's exclusive *Half-Life 2* strategy, guaranteed to surprise and astonish.

We were also delighted this month to place The Phone Call to the lucky winner of the "Win a *Half-Life 2* Falcon Northwest PC" contest in our December 2004 issue. We received *29,000* individual entries for this $6,000 super-rig, and on deadline day it all came down to one random drawing and our contacting the winner. Sure enough, we reached Charlie Minneker at his home and TheVede was able to announce the joyous news in real time. Congratulations again, Charlie.

And since the odds were 28,999-in-29,000 that you were not Charlie Minneker, we're glad to say that this month features yet another mega-rig giveaway. Turn to page 88 for the full story, and may TheVede be with you.

Finally, be sure to enter this month's Quote Contest by identifying the movie quoted above, and you could be the randomly chosen winner of a free game. Send your guess to *ednote@pcgamer.com*. Or, if you have a cell phone, you can text-message your entry to the number 76278 — in your message, type the word "PCG," then the movie title. And congrats to the winner of our Holiday 2004 quote contest, Greg Matthews of Ft. Worth, Texas, who correctly ID'd the line from *Willow*. Enjoy your game, Greg!

Dan Morris, Editor-in-Chief

REVIEWS 02.05

62 Alexander
60 Axis & Allies
53 Bad Mojo Redux
48 Battle for Middle-Earth
75 Battles in Normandy
53 Blitzkrieg: Rolling Thunder
59 Dragoon
76 EverQuest II
62 Final Fantasy XI: Chains of Promathia
72 Hidden & Dangerous 2: Sabre Squadron
71 I of the Dragon
68 The Incredibles
64 Joint Ops: Escalation
71 Kart Challenge 2005
74 MTX: Mototrax
52 NBA Live 2005

54 Need for Speed Underground 2
68 Painkiller: Battle out of Hell
72 Return to Mysterious Island
61 Secret of the Silver Earring
46 Sid Meier's Pirates!
64 Space Interceptor
70 Superpower 2
59 Time of Defiance
75 Tin Soldiers
44 World of Warcraft
58 Zoo Tycoon 2

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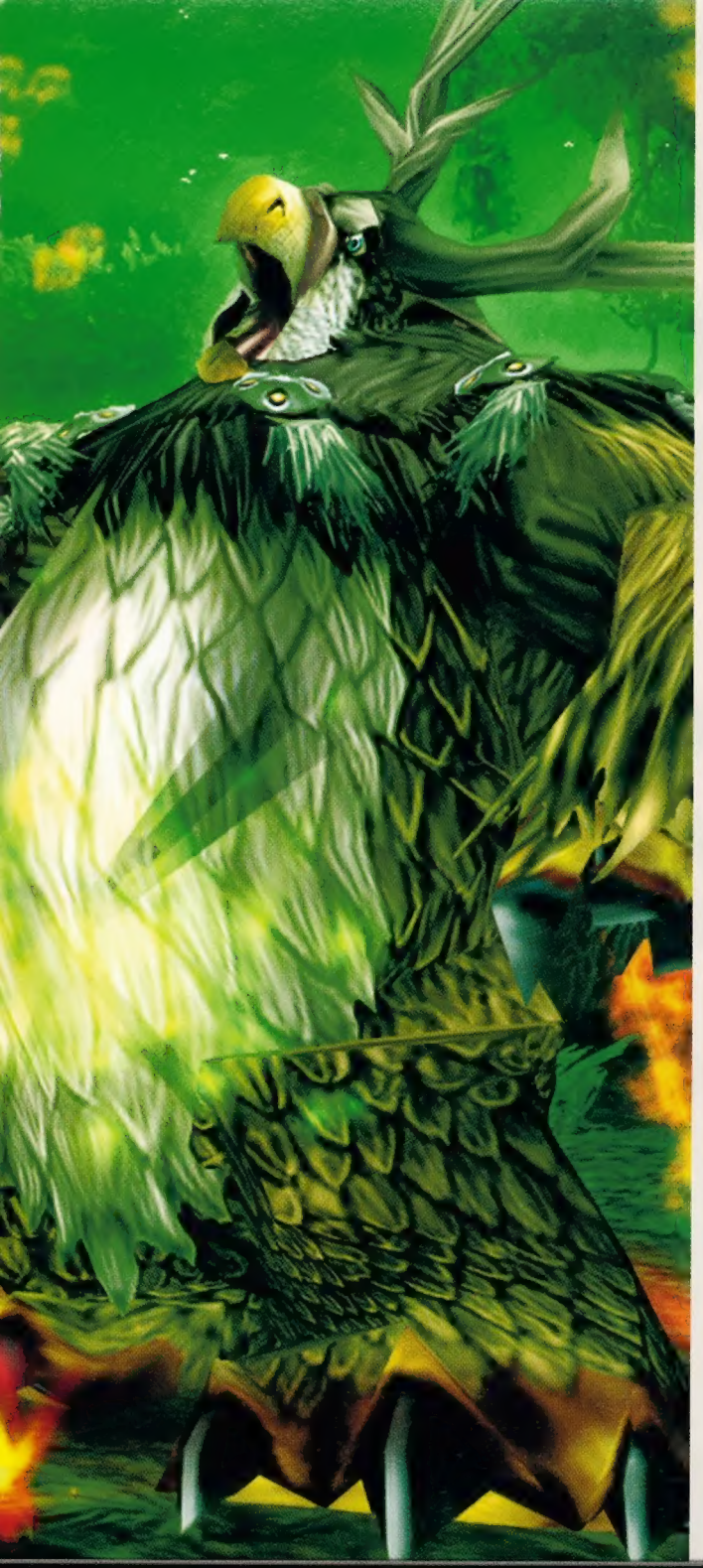

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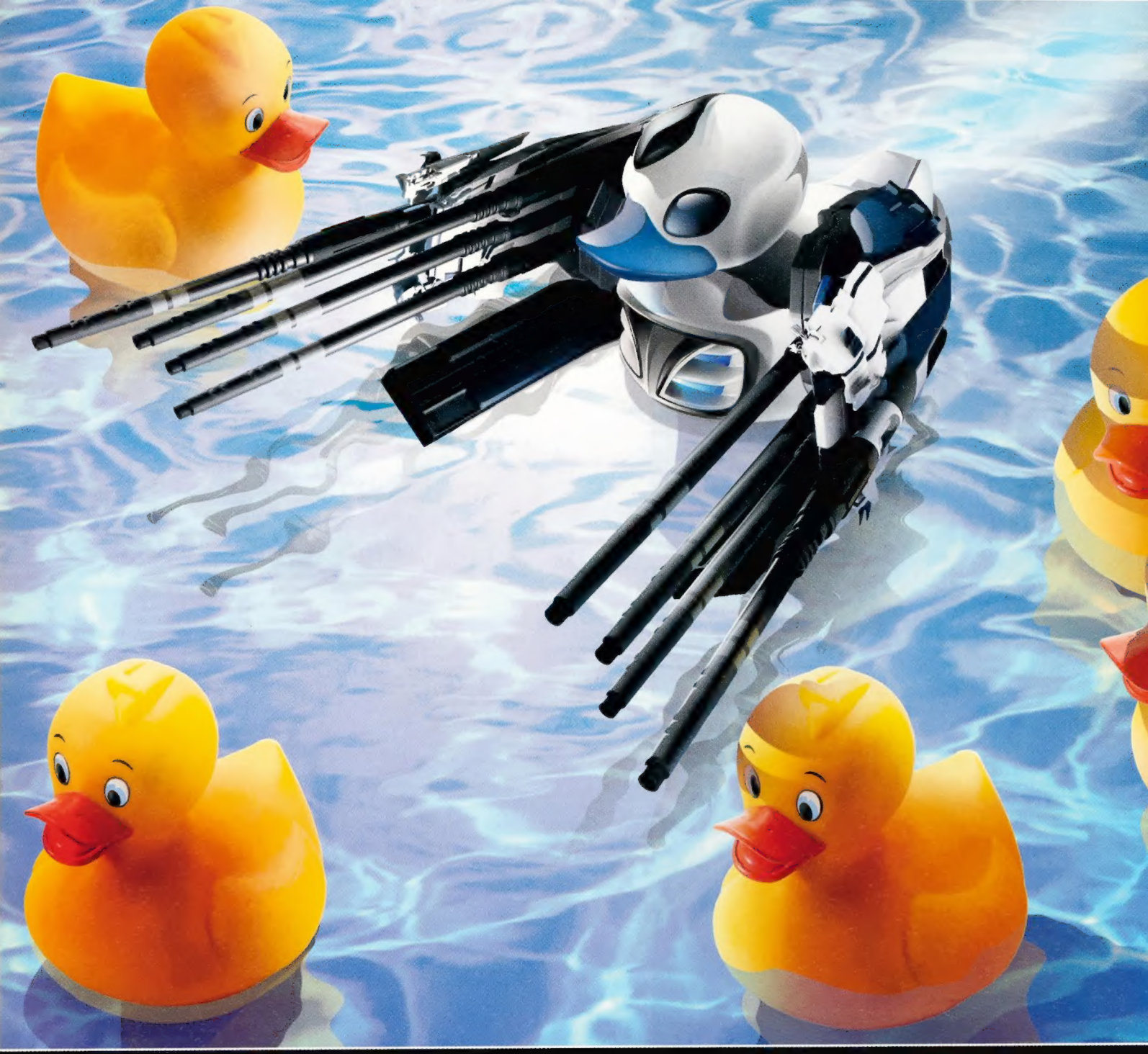

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THE SITH LORDS

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ALL WILL MAKE THE JOURNEY.
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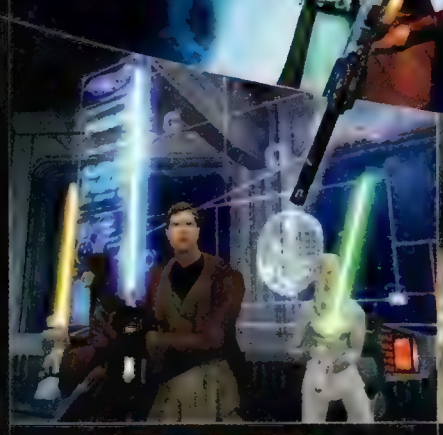
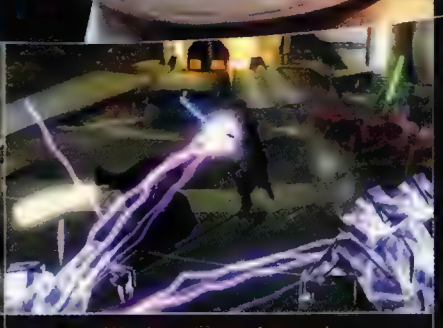


Your companions will follow you to the light side of the Force based on your choices

Travel among 7 worlds and explore new environments on your mission to save the galaxy.



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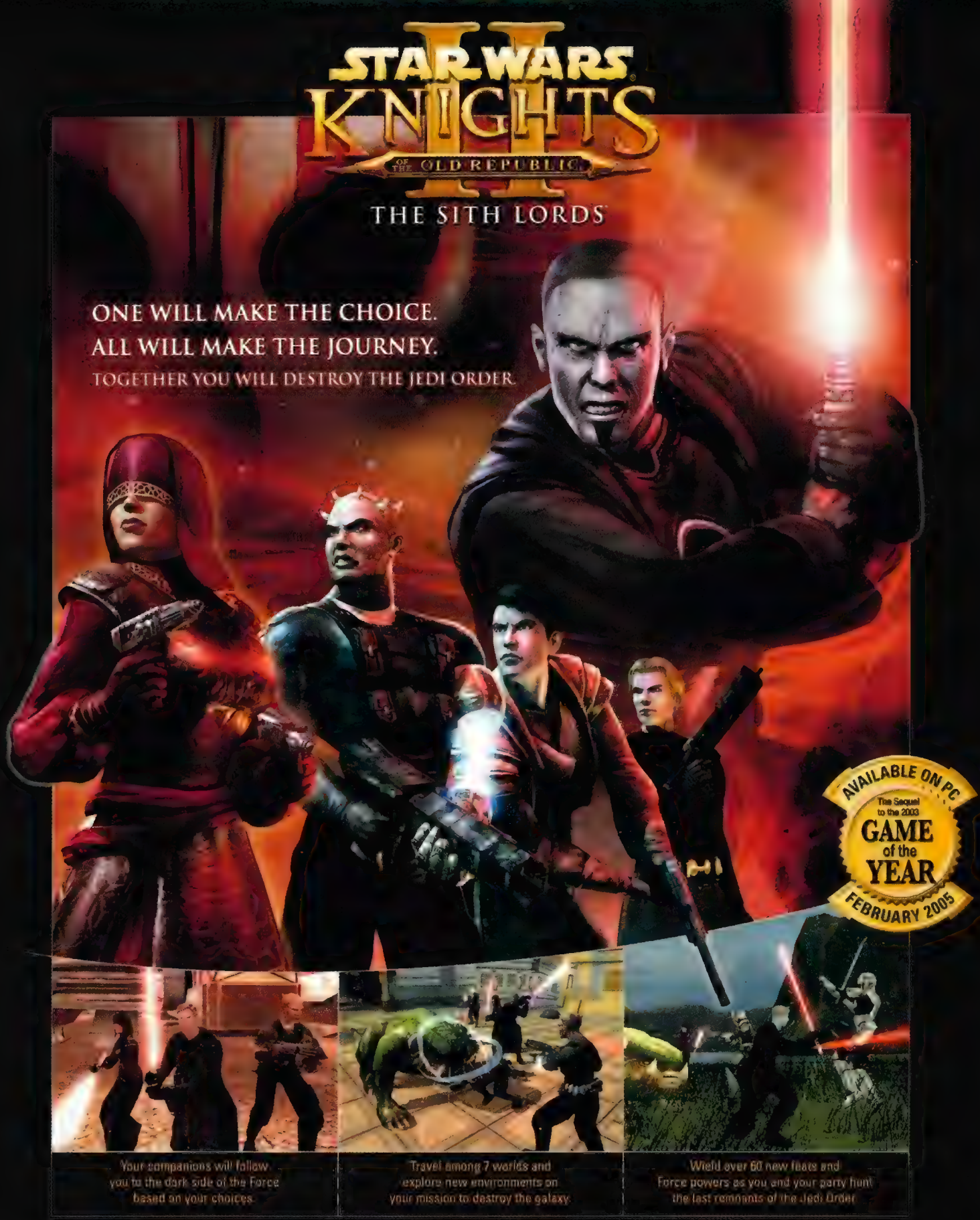

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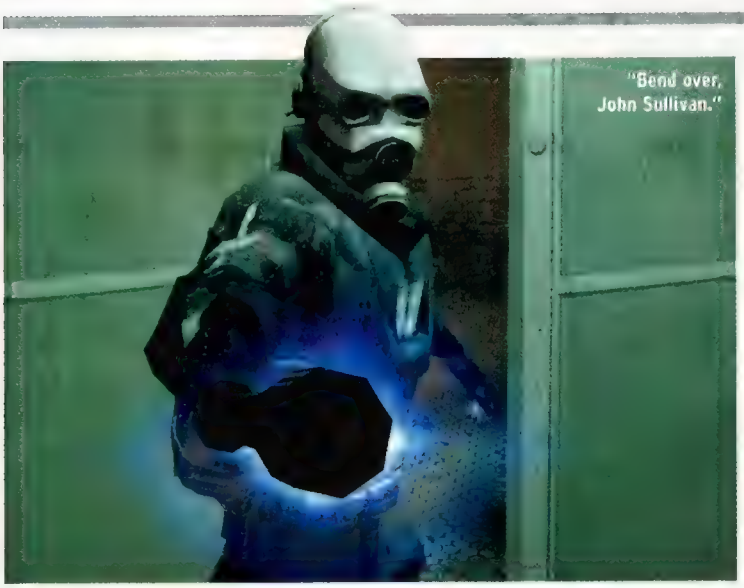

"Bend over, John Sullivan."

Not surprisingly, this month's hot topic was still* Half-Life 2. *Here's what some of you thought about the game:

Not even your 98% review could prepare me for the sheer glory of *Half-Life 2*. I actually laughed myself off my chair when I realized I could trash the oppressed workers' doorless apartments. Nothing beats picking up a TV, ripping its cord from the wall, and tossing it through a window to the street below, followed by anything else that isn't nailed down. In short, this game allows me to live out my rockstar alien-hunter fantasy.

After playing the single-player game for a handcramp-inducing amount of time, I thought I'd check out *Counter-Strike: Source* for 10 minutes or so. After not blinking for three hours, I decided in my sleep-deprived psychosis that Valve was trying to kill me. Why else would they include two fantastic, more-addictive-than-crack games in one package?

— STEFFAN PEARCE LOE

Game writers and story designers (especially of the FPS variety) are stuck in a rut. Can anyone say hackneyed? Both *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2* are visually stunning, but their depth as games is deplorable. I can only hope that Valve and id will license their graphics technology to more gifted game designers like Rockstar and DICE.

— ANDY

Half-Life 2 is beyond question the best technological toolkit for game development to date, and hopefully some other engine licensee (or some modders) will do something of note with it. But *Half-Life 2* is the most contrived, aimless railed shooter I've ever played.

"Unequaled interactivity" — what interactivity? Every puzzle, every stop point in the game, has one solution. There's only one way to play the game, only one way to interact in any given circumstance.

The story makes no sense and is utterly without explanation or character motivation, and in the end just fizzles into nothing. Play the original *Deus Ex* again to see someone get the story right: a long story with multiple endings, consistent characters with clear motivations, and *many* ways to approach each problem. *That's* game design.

City 17 is unpopulated and unexplorable. NPCs are non-existent except for the indestructible main characters, who are never explained or realized. And the denouement is without emotion or even a true ending.

There's a lot to like or admire in *Half-Life 2*: great graphics, best physics implementation yet, immersive sound, and so on. But beyond that, it's just a console railed shooter.

— JOHN SULLIVAN

My first reaction to *Half-Life 2* was "Oh wow, this game is beautiful." Oh-so-many things to look at and do — just amazing. The pace is just right, and I love the way Valve puts subtle hints here and there for solving the puzzles, correctly assuming that most gamers are semi-intelligent beings.

The biggest problem with *HL 2* is that it keeps me up too late. If this game doesn't win Game of the Year, it would be a disgrace indeed.

— DAVID K. MEDLEY

"'Cause I've got faith of the heart...going where my heart will take me..."

SIMPLY STELLAR

I'm so pleased that Andy Mahood devoted his Holiday '04 Sim Column to the *Orbiter* space sim.

Orbiter is an amazing experience. The graphics, controls, and overall design are excellent for a non-professional product. The initial tutorial is very well-written and will get you from the ground to a stable Earth orbit with relative ease.

I've played many wonderful games, but few gaming moments compare with winning a hard fight against gravity, rotating my craft forward, and seeing the sun coming over the horizon of the Pacific Ocean far below.

— DAVID GAUER

TALK ABOUT... STEAM

Readers also had plenty of feedback on Valve Software's game-distribution service, Steam — all of it critical. Among the many comments:

After your 98% review of *Half-Life 2*, combined with my own anticipation, I ran to the local computer store and nabbed it the day it arrived. But I'm disappointed that you failed to recognize the low points of this game — like the fact that Steam just totally stinks! Not that Valve can be blamed for protecting its software after the hacker theft, but this is a little ridiculous: After 45 minutes of installation, I jump with joy only to realize that now Steam has to validate my game files. Not just once, but every single time I play! *Hey, what the hell is that?*

— DAN SALLITT

Steam is aptly named because all I get from it is steamed. What a piece of crap! I buy PC games because I like to play PC games. But with Steam I have to log in every time I want to play. (The offline mode doesn't seem to work.) And every time I log in, it takes about five minutes to do whatever it does to let me play. Currently I've been online for 10 minutes while Steam "validates" *Half-Life 2*. If this is the future of Valve games, count me out.

— MARK GREEN

I bought my *Half-Life 2* copy on opening day, only to have my hopes dashed in the first few minutes of the install. Whattaya mean I have to install this thing called "Steam" *and* open some kind of account? Whattaya mean it errors out if you tell it not to install *Counter-Strike Source*? And Steam seems to think I want it to start every time I boot my machine. Excuse me, but that is *my* choice to make!

On the surface, Steam seems like a good idea: I can buy software and download it without ever visiting a store. But it also seems a bit like spyware/bloatware.

— STEAMED

"BEFORE NORMANDY
WE WERE JUST SOLDIERS."

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STUBBS THE ZOMBIE

Day of the Wisecracking Dead

At long last, and after countless pleas from *PC Gamer* zombie-phile Bill Harms, the industry is finally set to deliver the first Zombie Apocalypse game.

Stubbs the Zombie in "Rebel Without a Pulse" is a blackly comic grue-fest from Wideload Games, the dev studio run by former Bungie bigshot Alex Seropian. Built on an updated *Halo* engine, *Stubbs* casts you as a salesman-turned-zombie on a horrific (but funny) rampage.

"Your goal is indeed to bring about the Zombie Apocalypse," says Seropian. "We sat around and thought up every good gameplay opportunity for a zombie game."

The game is set in the 1950s in the city of Punchbowl. Designed as a utopian vision of the future, Punchbowl features all manner of kitschy Fifties sci-fi trappings, from robot gas-station attendants to space-age architecture. Imagine the surprise of its all-American residents when a shambling corpse shows up to raise hell.

As Stubbs, you have a range of undead attacks, from a basic shredding melee attack to the more ghoulish brain-eating (accompanied, in fine M-rated style, by a spray of cranial blood). You can pull out your own festering organs and lob them as grenades, and even detach your own hand to go out and wreak havoc *Evil Dead*-style. (Don't worry, it grows back.) While detached, your hand can even grab hold of a human and allow you to take control of him.

Most importantly, you can infect humans with your zombie contagion, creating zombie slaves that'll join your undead horde. You can give your minions orders through a simplified tactical interface, using them as cannon fodder in your escalating war against townspeople, police, and ultimately the military.

I was shown one level in which Stubbs is strapped down to an examination table in the bowels of the Punchbowl penitentiary. He frees himself using his detached hand, and then slaughters the surrounding scientists. Next, Stubbs possesses a guard's mind to release himself into the hallways. From there, a veritable orgy of death ensues. Blood, brains, and jokes fly non-stop. At one point, a zombie cop bites into a squealing rookie human cop, capping off the killing with a pithy "Another young cop dead too soon." It's all building up to a final showdown, with the destruction of Punchbowl (and our zombie-loving souls) hanging in the balance. ■ DAN MORRIS

VITAL STATS

GENRE: Action

DEVELOPER: Wideload Games

PUBLISHER: Aspyr

WWW: stubbsthezombie.com

RELEASE DATE: Summer 2005

DEVELOPER'S TRACK RECORD: Wideload was founded in 2003 by Alexander Seropian, the founder of Bungie Studios (*Halo*/*Halo 2*, the *Myth* series). *Stubbs* is Wideload's first game.

INCOMING!

I can't believe they're not butter!

CLOSE COMBAT: FIRST TO FIGHT

Made with the help of over 40 active-duty Marines, this squad-based shooter depicts how a military fireteam operates. So realistic, it was designed as a training sim for the Corps.

Highlights: AI incorporates psychology to replicate battlefield behavior; uses authentic small-unit tactics (Dev: Destineer; Pub: Global Star; Ships: 01/05)

NASCAR 2005: CHASE FOR THE CUP

Turning left, left, aaaand more left has never looked more photo-realistic. A new story mode eases you up the NASCAR ladder, and you can even play as a hero or villain.

Highlights: New car series (including American Muscle cars); updated graphics and physics based on driver feedback; online play (Dev/Pub: EA Sports; Ships: 02/05)

PSYCHOTOXIC

It's the year 2022 and you're Angie Prophet, an unlikely savior of humanity from impending nuclear armageddon. But not before icing hordes of guards in this first-person shooter.

Highlights: Features 29 action-filled levels; supernatural powers (invisibility, time-slowing); destructible environments (Dev: NuclearVision; Pub: Whiptail Interactive; Ships: 03/05)

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FREEDOM FORCE VS. THE THIRD REICH

AKA "Minuteman is nothing like Captain America. Please don't sue us, Marvel."

Dynamic lighting and particle effects are two of *Reich*'s new graphics features. But those ugly grass textures are less than amazing.

VITAL STATS

GENRE: Action/Strategy
DEVELOPER: Irrational Games
PUBLISHER: Vivendi Universal
WWW: irrationalgames.com
RELEASE DATE: March 2005

You know what real heroism is? Facing down a PR rep for *Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich* who strongly *insists* (under threat of a Minuteman-style smackdown, I think) that I not print any of the many twists and turns revealed in an alpha build that she's just handed me. Better not take any chances — she's got a crazy look in her eyes.

Not that I would ruin any surprises anyway. I adored the original game, not just because I'm a comic-book geek, but because it was a fantastic action/strategy experience immersed in the nostalgia of Sixties-era superheroes.

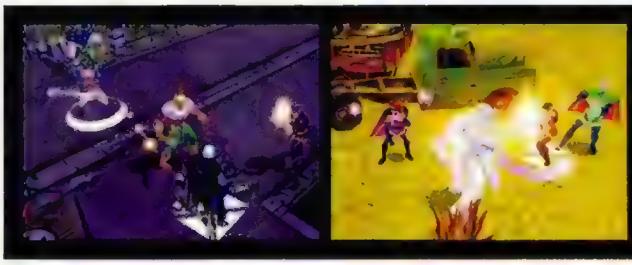
Third Reich picks up shortly after the end of the first game, reuniting Alche-Miss, Mentor, and the rest of the hero team. Yes, they eventually travel back through time and square off against Nazis (how, I can't say), but the scope of the story is much larger than the game's title suggests.

What's really surprising is that despite having a completely new graphics engine, *Third Reich* is almost visually identical to its predecessor. NDL's Gamebryo engine supports pixel and vertex shading, dynamic shadows and lighting, a variety of particle animations, and frame-buffer effects — yet these new features have been implemented so subtly that most people watching over my shoulder didn't even notice them.

Power outbursts such as El Diablo's Inferno are more spectacular than before, though, illuminating darkened surroundings and creating plumes of particle-system smoke. And when the front of a building is destroyed, you can now see its interior floor levels and furniture. But still — couldn't some of *Freedom Force*'s plainer textures and models, specifically the game's dull 2D grass, receive some razzle-dazzle, too? Let's hope for some.

Beyond some minor tweaks to the user interface (such as holding down the Ctrl key to force an Overpower attack), the most noticeable change to gameplay is that a hero not under your direct control will automatically fight back when attacked. But that doesn't mean *Third Reich* will play itself — as a test, my three "ignored" AI-controlled squadmates were pitted against six mutant Killarillas...and lost, mostly because without human guidance, they had access only to their default, no-energy (read: non-powerful) attacks.

The question is, Will *Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich* be enough of an upgrade to be a super-sequel? (How's that for a diabolical cliff-hanger?) Stay tuned. ■ CHUCK OSBORN



FAR LEFT: New heroes Quetzacoatl and Tombstone join the established FF gang in nailing some Nazis. Quetzy is a super-healer who can cure allies of damage; Tombstone is a gun-toting, supernatural wraith who can resurrect a fallen comrade. LEFT: El Diablo's flame powers are the perfect counter to this abominable snowman.

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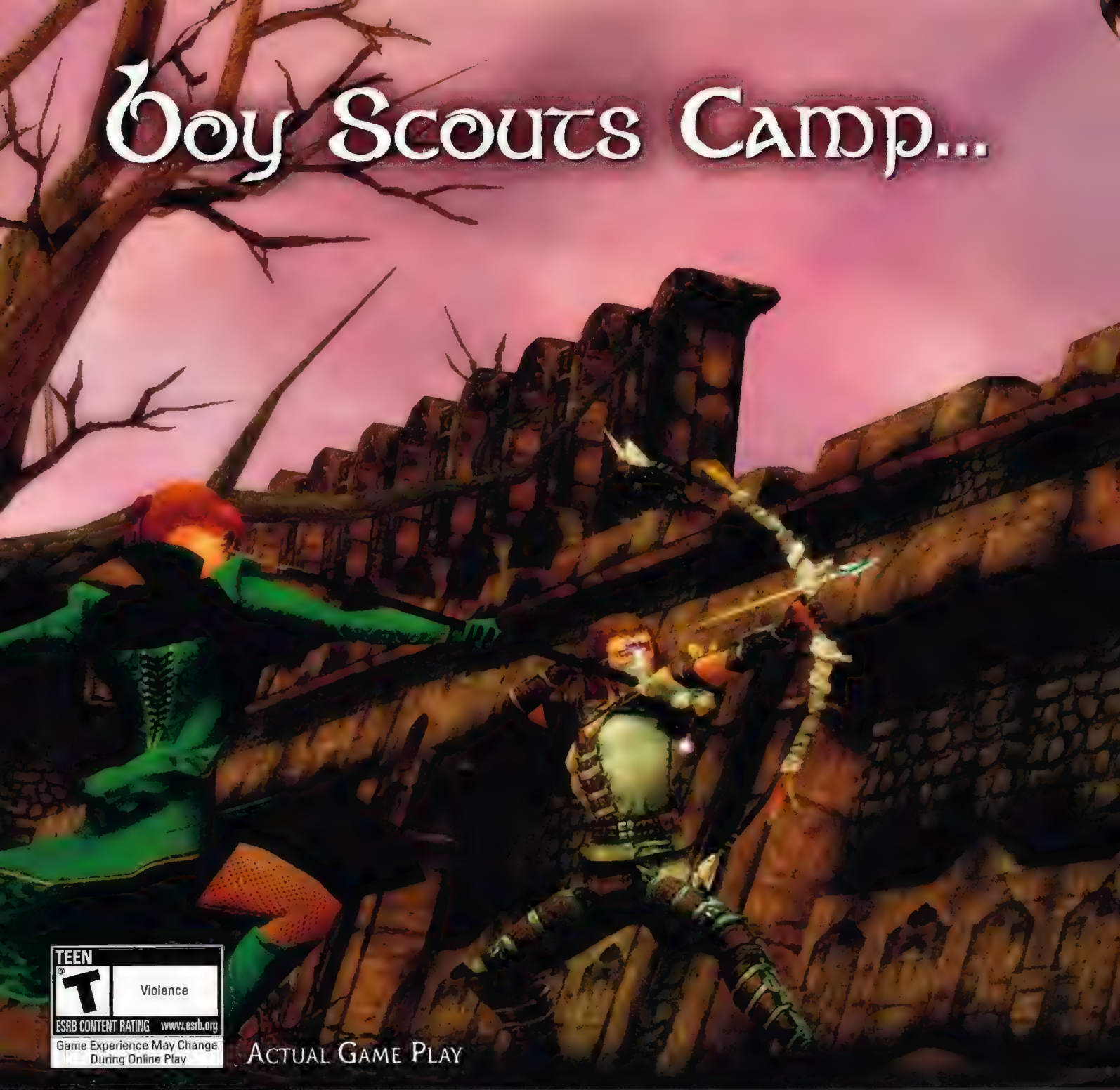

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DEVELOPERS AND PUBLISHERS DUKE IT OUT

VALVE/VIVENDI COURT BATTLES UNDERSCORE AN INDUSTRY-WIDE STRUGGLE FOR PROFITS AND IP RIGHTS

GAME DEVELOPERS ARE LOOKING for a bigger piece of the action. While successful indie studios have made fortunes for services rendered, it's just as common for them to be cast away by publishers looking to shift production in-house, or seeking a less-expensive alternative for a hit game's sequel. What it all comes down to is intellectual property (IP) — who owns it, and who can maximize it for cold, hard cash. The battle over IP has begun to pit developers against publishers as never before.

Valve Software's tortuous relationship with publisher Vivendi Universal Games got national attention in no less than the pages of *The Washington Post* last November. Although neither Valve nor Vivendi wants to discuss the 200 court filings between them over the distribution of *Half-Life 2*, it's obvious that Valve's Steam network, which circumvents Vivendi entirely as the game's distributor, has caused a stir within our industry.

It's not new for developers to sell directly to gamers. A recent example is space simulation *EVE Online*, which was initially available at retail through Simon & Schuster, and then directly over the net from developer CCP. A few years ago sequels to the original *Gettysburg* strategy game were available

Pandemic's deal with the Army allowed it to release a commercial version of *Full Spectrum Warrior* (left) and keep the rights to use the engine going forward. Valve opted for total self-funding to retain control of *Half-Life 2*.

exclusively from developer Firaxis.

But when it comes to best-selling franchises that sell in the millions, ownership over publishing rights becomes a big issue for independent developers.

"As an independent, you are always looking at ways to chip away at the existing revenue model," says Pandemic Studios President Josh Resnick. "Do you commercialize your technology like id and Epic, or opt out of the traditional sales model like Valve? BioWare has done a fantastic job of building their community, and are now trying to monetize it with add-ons. Yet what it all comes down to is ownership of your own franchise IP. If you [have ownership], you are in a much better negotiating position with publishers."

Resnick, who has cut deals with LucasArts (*Star Wars: Battlefront*, *Mercenaries*) and THQ (*Full Spectrum Warrior*, *Destroy All Humans!*) in recent years, says he's found that game publishers are very open to negotiating creative contract terms. For Pandemic, the goal is to ensure a long-term involvement with publishers.

"They need to know you're doing versions one, two, and three with them. That way you can get publishers to invest heavily on version one with the understanding that they can recoup their investment on versions two and three. Naturally, the developer has to deliver with a first game that sells, but the publisher has to know you're not shopping the franchise around after that first release."

With *Full Spectrum Warrior*, getting the contract to create a training simulation for the U.S. Army proved to be a boon for Pandemic. Looking to entice good game developers to create a ground-warfare training simulation, the Army actively encouraged Pandemic to create a commercial off-shoot, and made that prospect more tempting by ceding the IP rights to Resnick and company.

Pandemic isn't the only indie developer to build an unorthodox and lucrative relationship with the Defense Department. Another example is BreakAway Games, best known for recent strategy games such as *Tropico: Paradise Island* and *Emperor: Rise of the Middle Kingdom*. BreakAway is now hard at work on a ground-vehicle simulation providing visualization of human and vehicle AI for the Defense Department.

"Finding the government business really takes time, and you have to have someone on the inside working with you," advises Mike McShaffry, who heads BreakAway's Austin studio. "But once you get those contracts, they're good for years of work that can lower your project costs and allow you to leverage your skills. If there are no contract stipulations in areas like security clearances, we can often take that tech, and much of the content, and turn it around into a [commercial] next-gen game."

THE ART OF THE DEAL

VALVE DIRECTOR OF MARKETING DOUG Lombardi offers some insight into the tightrope walk a developer embarks upon when negotiating IP rights. "In any negotiation, if you want something, you need to be willing to trade another something for it, or be willing to do a lot of shopping until you find the right match."

Equipped with a world-renowned property in *Half-Life*, Valve fights from a position of strength. But McShaffry admits that few of the options open to developers can yield anywhere near the money generated by selling tens of millions copies at retail. So everyone will be intently watching how well Valve will do selling *Half-Life 2* directly to gamers via Steam.

For now, Valve isn't saying how many copies of the game it has sold or expects to sell. Though retailers sold 250,000 copies of *HL 2* in the week after its Nov. 16 launch, when asked what specific revenue targets Valve has for Steam purchases, Lombardi told *PC Gamer* that the endeavor remains an experiment.

"After an extended beta and lots of hard work, Steam is now the backend for all of our games, serving millions of gamers — allowing us to conduct more robust and secure betas of new products, and to sell the final products directly," he told us. "We're watching to see what happens."

So are a lot of other indie developers.

— *George T. Chronis*

NEWS TICKER

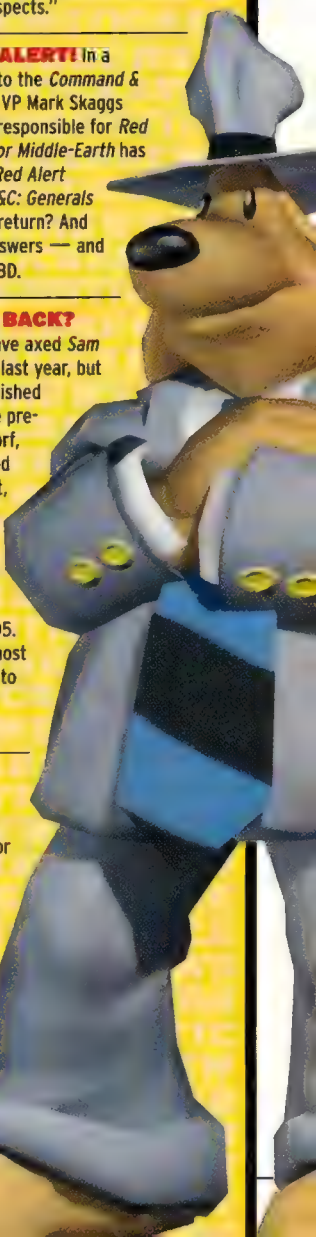
If you don't read it here, it's not news

HOLY LAWSUIT! Marvel recently filed suit against Cryptic Studios and NCsoft over their superhero-themed online RPG *City of Heroes*, claiming that the game violates the comic-book behemoth's trademark characters. Developer Cryptic responds: "The complaint is meritless. Cryptic Studios is confident that the District Court will reject all of Marvel's claims and fully vindicate Cryptic Studios in all respects."

RED ALERT ALERT! In a December letter to the *Command & Conquer* community, EA VP Mark Skaggs revealed that the team responsible for *Red Alert 2* and *The Battle for Middle-Earth* has started work on a new *Red Alert* game powered by the *C&C: Generals* Sage engine. Will Tanya return? And will she date us? The answers — and a release date — are TBD.

SAM & MAX BACK? LucasArts may have axed *Sam & Max: Freelance Police* last year, but reports of the nearly finished project's demise may be premature. Wolfgang Kierdorf, founder of German-based Bad Brain Entertainment, hinted on adventure-game fansite The Inventory that the company is in negotiations with LucasArts to release the game in 2005. If true, it could be the most celebrated resurrection to occur in the past 2,000 years.

GROCERY SHOPPING? BUY A PC GAME DVD Station, a service for renting and buying movies on DVD, will begin selling PC games in Q2 2005. Kiosks are currently located in such convenient locations as college campuses, grocery stores, gyms, and even New York City's Grand Central Station.



D.J.'s RELEASE METER

We track the release dates so you don't have to

Due to specific and credible threats of imminent game releases, *PC Gamer* is raising the Release Meter Warning Level to orange, or high. This means we have reason to believe that somewhere, sometime in the future, some games will be released. We encourage all citizens to remain in their homes, stockpile RAM, and upgrade their graphics cards. Duct tape and plastic wrap couldn't hurt either, although we can't imagine what you'd use those for. Send release-date questions and tips to *DJ@PCGamer.com*.

FEBRUARY 2005

TITLE	PUBLISHER	SHIPS
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	Bethesda	02/01/05
Origin of the Species	Tri-Synergy	02/01/05
Will of Steel	Tri-Synergy	02/01/05
Empire Earth 2	Vivendi	02/07/05
Guild Wars	NCsoft	02/07/05
KOTOR II: The Sith Lords	LucasArts	02/15/05
Project: Snowblind	Eidos	02/15/05
Heritage of Kings	Ubisoft	02/15/05
Nexus: The Jupiter Incident	Vivendi	02/15/05
World at War	Matrix Games	02/15/05
Driv3r	Atari	02/15/05
NASCAR 2005	EA	02/15/05
Brothers in Arms	Ubisoft	02/25/05

MARCH 2005

TITLE	PUBLISHER	SHIPS
Star Wars: Republic Commando	LucasArts	03/01/05
MVP Baseball 2005	EA	03/07/05
PsychoToxic	Whiptail	03/07/05
The Bard's Tale	Vivendi	03/15/05
Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich	Vivendi	03/15/05
Pariah	Digital Extremes	03/15/05
Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory	Ubisoft	03/15/05
The Sims 2: University	EA	03/15/05
Battlefield 2	EA	03/25/05

WIN A COPY OF SID MEIER'S PIRATES!

Well, shiver me timbers — we've got 5 copies of *Sid Meier's Pirates!* to give away! To be eligible for our utterly random drawing, just send an email to *eyewitness@pcgamer.com* with "Pirates" in the subject heading, and include your name and address in the body of the message. Only one entry per person allowed. Contest ends March 1, 2005. See additional rules on page 103.

AVANT GAME

Game engines are finally legitimized as an art medium — can a 3D Dali be far behind?

EVERY TIME YOU TAKE A SCREENSHOT from an awesome battle scene in your favorite shooter, you're creating a piece of art. Every time you see a scripted in-game rendered cutscene, you're a patron of painstaking cinematic craft. Enthusiasts long ago coined a technical term for gaming art — *machinima*.

Machinima has come a long way since the days when fans swooned over the crude-production videos of "Gang Wars" and "Father Frags Best." Back then, users created their own proprietary tools to record and capture movies from in-game scenes. Level designers built maps to use as sets and modelers designed "actors" for players to manipulate in multiplayer games while a director captured the video. Today, the process is much more streamlined, with emerging support from third-party machinima specialists and game publishers.

The Sims 2 is one of the first games to include built-in machinima tools, allowing anyone with a little imagination to create their own virtual sitcoms. In fact, EA has partnered with the developers of the popular *Red vs. Blue Halo* machinima series to produce *The Strangerhood*, a *Friends*-esque sitcom set in the *Sims* universe.

As Producer Matt Hullum of Rooster Teeth Productions explains: "*The Sims 2* is the first videogame to really make movie-capturing a fun and easily accessible part of [the game]...What you see in *The Strangerhood* is pretty much straight out of the game. We use a few other tools in post-production, like Adobe Premiere for editing, but the visuals could be re-created by anybody who plays *Sims 2*."

Aside from game cinematics, artists like John Bichard use games to create more traditional art pieces. His "White Room" project (*www.hydropia.org/middle04.htm*), which uses screenshots from *Max Payne 2*, portrays scenes from the aftermath of in-game shootouts. Says Bichard: "The resultant sterile space is in direct contrast to the game space where players engage in tropes of massacre, but with no apparent consequence. I am exploring what would happen if the game had consequences — what would happen to the remains once the player has moved on."

Machinima and game art have profound implications for both the gaming and art worlds. Machinima has already penetrated mainstream outlets with FountainHead Entertainment's *Quake III* engine-based music video for the band Zero 7, shown on MTV. And Paul Marino of the online Academy for Machinima envisions a world in which machinima films can be streamed via coding into your living rooms, so instead of a large compressed film, the movie is actually delivered as digital assets (models, maps, sounds). If machinima trends continue to develop, don't be surprised if one day you find yourself watching *The Strangerhood* on prime-time TV.

For more machinima coverage, go to *www.pcgamer.com*.

"White Room" screenshot taken from the videogame *Max Payne 2*. *Max Payne 2* is a trademark of Rockstar Games, Inc., copyright 2003 Rockstar Games, Inc. All rights reserved. Artwork copyright 2004 John Paul Bichard.

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DEVELOPERS GO BLOGGER

We review the personal web logs of the people behind the games

BLOGGER AMERICAN McGEE

AMERICAN'S FREQUENT POSTS are full of interesting updates on his many projects, ranging from very creepy concept art from upcoming games like *Bad Day L.A.* and *City of the Dead* to early hints about film versions of *Oz* and *Grimm*. He also writes extensively about his travels to Asia, with links to dozens of pictures of absolutely everything he encounters along the way. Basically, it's an in-depth look at the wheelings and dealings of a budding games-tycoon.

The layout is very basic and utilitarian, but unlike your typical bare-bones blog, the menu at the left has links to a FAQ page, a bio, a list of current projects, merchandise stores, and a forum. You can even get an RSS feed that'll keep you apprised of new updates.

FAMOUS FOR *Quake, Quake II, American McGee's Alice* **BLOG NAME** American McGee's personal website and weblog **URL** www.AmericanMcGee.com **STARTED** April 15, 2004

FINAL VERDICT 83%

BLOGGER RON GILBERT

The Secret of Monkey Island

GILBERT'S BLOG BEGAN with a post of his 1989 essay "Why Adventure Games Suck, And What We Can Do About It" — an essay that eventually led him to create the *Monkey Island* games. Since then it has evolved into a regularly updated outlet for what he describes as his "often incoherent and bitter ramblings about the game industry," along with plenty of entertaining rambling on technology, gadgets, and society's ills in general, all of it liberally sprinkled with randomly bolded text.

The page is laid out simply but elegantly with a custom-stylized header and an Ugly Tomato mascot. There are plenty of bonus features to be found, including the Grumpy Gamer flash cartoon, an RSS feed, and a bio inexplicably written in Latin.

FAMOUS FOR *The Secret of Monkey Island, Day of the Tentacle, Full Throttle* **BLOG NAME** Grumpy Gamer **URL** www.grumpygamer.com **STARTED** May 22, 2004

FINAL VERDICT 81%

BLOGGER ? UNKNOWN

NBA 2005

WRITTEN BY SOMEONE claiming to be the spouse of an EA game developer, this single-post blog made a big splash soon after it was posted — truly showing the power of the blog form to influence the world. The author uses an insider's perspective to rail against the long hours and excessive schedules of game development, where programmers grapple with soul-crushing "crunch time" and are asked to work 90-hour weeks without comp time. It's definitely worth a read for anyone considering a glamorous, rewarding career in the games industry.

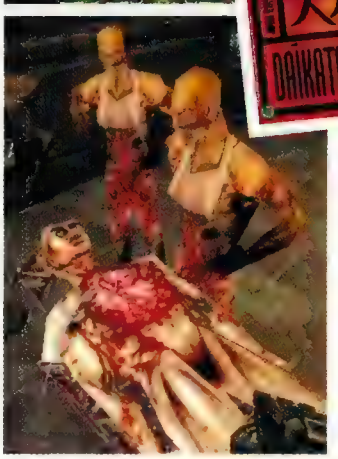
FAMOUS FOR Causing a king-size ruckus **BLOG NAME** Ea_Spouse **URL** www.livejournal.com/users/ea_spouse/ **STARTED** Nov. 10, 2004

FINAL VERDICT 80%

BLOGGER JOHN ROMERO

EVER WONDER what life would be like if you made it big in the game industry? For a quick example, go back to Romero's Oct. 21, 2000, post, which begins with "So...I got my Hummer back from the audio shop..." or his Jan. 27, 2002, post about selling his bright yellow Testarossa. The whole blog is full of details about his latest toys, tech gadgets, and world travels, and plenty of photos to go along with them. Somehow Romero also finds room to reminisce about the glory days of game-making, and to give details on all his games.

But there's apparently one thing money can't buy, and that's a decent blog design. A cluttered layout and bland color scheme put the page just one notch above ugly. Also, Romero likes to take long breaks from blogging — the four-year-old blog is full of very noticeable gaps, the most recent being June 28 to Nov. 6.



FAMOUS FOR *Wolfenstein 3D, Doom, Daikatana* **BLOG NAME** Planet Romero **URL** www.planetromero.com **STARTED** July 26, 2000

FINAL VERDICT 74%

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AGE OF EMP

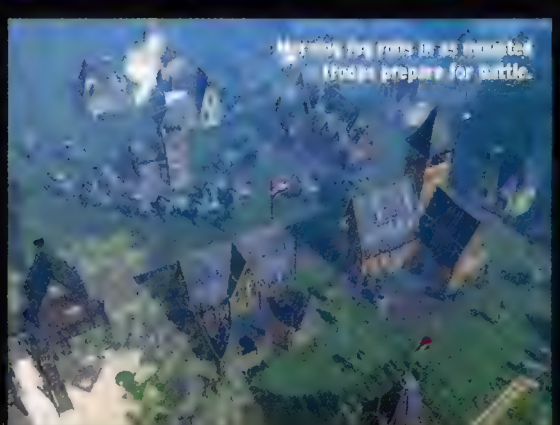
Ensemble enters an Age of Discovery — boldly going where no RTS game has ever gone before

IRES II

//// BY CHUCK OSBORN
OPENING ILLUSTRATION
BY CRAIG MULLINS

Age III's transition to full 3D will incorporate dynamic lighting and shadows, bloom effects, and destructible environments.

Conquering the New World begins with a small settlement.



Your army can range in its mounted troops prepare for battle.

Native tribes can become your allies through trade.

The elevator opens, and I walk out into a dimmed, futuristic hallway. An audible hum fills the air, as if Ensemble's office is being rocket-propelled through the far reaches of space (instead of actually being parked in a sleepy suburb of Dallas, Texas). A background of stars and out-of-this-world graphics effects beckons to visitors from the sleek, black monitor embedded in the wall. Any minute now, I expect Scotty to appear from Engineering and offer up a refreshing Romulan ale.

So what in the name of Spock does *Star Trek* have to do with a history-themed real-time strategy game like *Age of Empires III*?

Nothing...and everything, as I soon learn from Ensemble President and CEO Tony Goodman. He's a quirky, likeable character who has gone above and beyond the call of duty to make sure that Ensemble's office is so entertaining that, for its employees, arriving at their jobs each morning is like visiting a theme park. Inspired by Las Vegas' "*Star Trek* Experience," Goodman flew the architects responsible for designing Ensemble's new digs to the tourist attraction before they began building four years ago. Their mission: to boldly re-create its sci-fi chic ambiance (on a far more modest budget).

Why? Because Goodman really likes *Star Trek* — a lot. But mostly because he knows that the way to keep a bunch of veteran game developers happy — and the way to attract celebrated new recruits — is to make work fun. And if that means giving your 80 or so employees access to kitchens that are the spitting image of Quark's Bar, then so be it.

As trippy as the place is, especially to a first-time visitor, Ensemble's Federation-styled backdrop is a parallel to the company's philosophy about the type of games that it makes. With 16 million copies of its *Age of Empires* franchise sold worldwide, Ensemble has single-handedly introduced a fresh style to the RTS genre once dominated by the *Command & Conquer* series. Now, after a detour into the realm of fantasy with 2002's *Age of Mythology*, Ensemble is, like Captain Kirk and crew, seeking out new life — in the tired universe of strategy gaming, that is — with a game that, at its core, is all about discovery.

Which brings us to *Age of Empires III*...

The Wonder Years

Continuing from where *Age of Empires II* left off, the third chapter in the series begins in 1500 A.D. and chronicles the Age of Discovery that started around the time when Columbus "discovered" the new world. (Yeah, we know — several indigenous tribes were already living in America long before then. Write a historian, not us.) The single-player campaign then follows the course of American history up through 1850 — ending right before the start of the Civil War.

In multiplayer mode, you'll be able to choose from among eight different European civilizations. Only three — the French, Spanish, and British — have been officially confirmed by Ensemble, but the smart money says the Dutch and Swiss will be two more. Games will start with your arrival by ship to the shores of America, where your goal will be to explore the New World, establish trade routes, forge alliances with Native Americans, build an army for battle against rival Europeans, and ultimately bring glory to your home country.

Codenamed "Rocket" by its internal development team, *Age of Empires III* almost turned into an *Age* game that didn't have "ages." Taking inspiration from German board games, the designers crafted a strategy game in which you captured victory points to win scenarios, but without technologically advancing your civilization through new ages, which is one of the hallmarks of the series. Another version had "auto-Ages," in which each side automatically leveled up at the same time. And borrowing from massively multiplayer games, one incarnation had persistent characters that would build in experience from match to match.

VITAL STATS

Genre: Real-Time Strategy

Developer: Ensemble Studios

Publisher: Microsoft

Release Date: Second Half 2005

What's So Special? Ensemble helped define the modern RTS game with *Age of Empires II* and *Age of Mythology*. Now the same team has a new goal with *Age III*: evolve the genre and rock gamers with the best graphics ever seen in an RTS game.

TEEN
T
Mild Language
Suggestive Themes
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING
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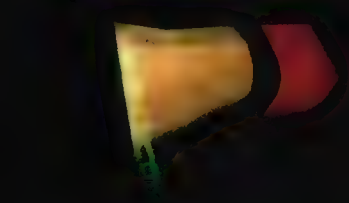
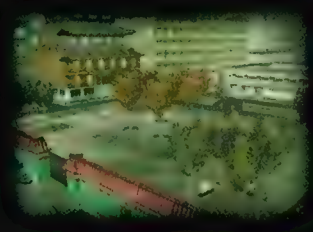
I know why, night after night,

you sit in front of your computer.



THE MATRIX IS ONLINE. JACK IN NOW.

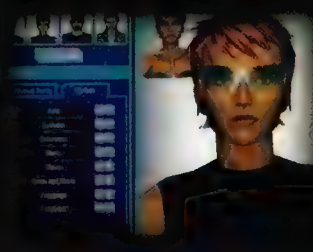
The Matrix Online is the future of the Matrix, picking up right where the trilogy left off. The revolution is over, but within the Matrix a secret war still rages: a war of control between the Machines, the Exiles, and the people of Zion. Come join the continuing storyline of the Matrix where you decide who to oppose and what to believe. Only your courage and perseverance can protect the legacy of Neo's sacrifice. Jack in.



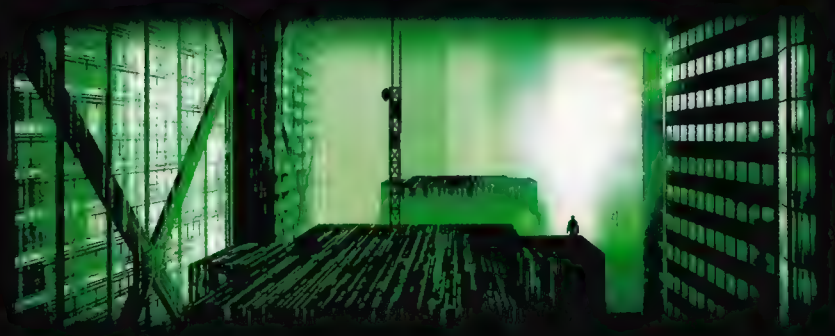
- Explore every inch of The Matrix: Mega City—the most realistic urban environment of any MMO. The entire city, including every room of every building, is in play.

- Defeat your enemies using devastating martial arts maneuvers and gunplay. Breakthrough MMO technology produces rich animations and hyper-kinetic battle sequences.

- Escape character regret. Reconfigure your character's abilities and performance on demand.



- Communicate with people in and out of the game in real-time using AOL® Instant Messenger™ technology.



The AI system from *Age of Mythology* has been heavily modified for use in *Age III*. Medusa would've been handy here, though.

While Lead Designer Greg Street asserts that Ensemble's initial stab was a "fun game," it didn't feel much like an *Age of Empires* game. A year and a half into development, incongruent elements and features were dropped. So the team regrouped, and decided to focus more closely on traditional gameplay — but also experiment with some of the first iterations' inventive ideas.

"Innovation has driven our design," says Ensemble Senior Designer Bruce Shelley, whose 20 years of experience making videogames includes a successful partnership with Sid Meier in the early 1990s co-designing such classics as *Railroad Tycoon* and *Sid Meier's Civilization*. The pressure was, and still is, on Ensemble to not only build on the success of its past *Age* games, but also to exceed such ambitious competitors as *Rome: Total War* and *Rise of Nations*.

"There isn't an RTS made that isn't played at Ensemble," says Street, who freely admits that the team borrows bits and pieces from the competition when brainstorming ideas. Another benefit to rampant sampling is that Ensemble is able to keep abreast of the latest trends and advancements in the genre, such as innovations in user interfaces, a move toward storylines with an epic scope, and, of course, full-3D graphics.

As development gelled on *Age III*, two areas were singled out for innovation. First on the list was the graphics engine, which the group decided had to be the very best on the block. So the "Rocket" team set a not-so-simple goal for itself: *Age of Empires III* would have the best-looking graphics of any game, period.

To accomplish that lofty aspiration, Ensemble built a brand-new graphics engine from the ground up that includes features like dynamic shadows and lighting; support for Pixel Shader 3.0; bloom effects that make lit objects seem to glow onscreen; and tone mapping to create near-photorealistic images. And one programmer has been devoted to nothing but water effects, just to ensure that the lapping oceans in the game look their very best.

Ensemble has also licensed the Havok physics engine for *Age of Empires III*. What that means for gameplay is that when you fire a cannon at a band of Redcoats, the ensuing mayhem will have all the pizzazz of an explosion in *Half-Life 2*: bodies fly through the air with ragdoll physics; tiny little hats are knocked off the heads of the injured; and your cannonball may continue to roll after impact, possibly uprooting trees or bystanders. Similarly, structures will destruct dynamically as they're fired upon, with bits of roofing and rubble flung airborne until the building finally crumbles.

Scottish-born explorer Morgan Black is the

Home, Sweet Home

Ensemble's second great innovation is the one it considers to be the most important. It's the concept of a Home City, a capital back in Europe that supports your efforts to conquer the New World.

The idea is a throwback to an early game design that included persistent characters. In multiplayer games, your Home City will be like a character in an RPG that "levels up" as you gain experience points, giving you access to varied upgrades. Levels and upgrades will carry over from game to game — but unlike in a typical massively multiplayer game, skill will be the most salient factor in who will win a match. So a player with a level-50 city won't automatically trump a level-45 competitor...though I wouldn't take any bets on a level-5 if I were you.

Both you and your opponents will be able to view your Home City at any time. Initially, it will be small and relatively unpopulated, but as

you earn glory (and XP) in the New World by hunting, fighting, and allying with native tribes, your city will grow more powerful. And as the city expands, so will its society — including crowded foot-traffic on city streets, the ability to erect magnificent buildings, and the sounds of urban living (like the clip-clop of horses or the grinding turn of a windmill). Wonder how the residents think you're doing? Click on one and he'll tell you.

The benefit of having a Home City will be economic support in the form of regular supply shipments delivered right to your colony's doorstep. Additionally, every level gained will give you access to more of a branching tree of potential upgrades. Some upgrades, like unlocking a mime to entertain the pedestrians of your Home City, will be purely cosmetic. But at least half of them can affect gameplay — for instance, opening up new types of units like Grenadiers or Scouting Parties, or being able to send reinforcements from your Home City.

As they become unlocked, you'll be able to build the illustrious buildings for which your home country's capital has become famous, such as Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral. Structures in a Home City can also be personalized — you can select the roof color and the decorations (such as gargoyles) that adorn its edifice, for example. The design team believes that the RPG elements involved in building up your city will motivate you to continue playing online long after the point at which similar games wear out their welcome.

Ensemble hasn't set a level cap for Home Cities yet, but expects it to be at least 100. A built-in matching system will help you find online opponents with comparable experience levels, but you'll be able to generate an unlimited number of Home Cities (with each representing a unique persistent "character") in case you want to compete against a buddy who just started playing the game.

"The dream in the creative industry is to come up with an idea that people don't know they want until they see it," says Bruce Shelley. If RTS buffs react to the Home City concept with that sort of *"Where has this been all my life?"* fanfare, then the Ensemble team will be able to breathe a collective sigh of relief. And the early word is promising: According to Ensemble, Microsoft has submitted *Age of Empires III* to public scrutiny through focus-group testing in Chicago, Dallas, and around Europe with positive reviews.

America, #@$% Yeah

Once you've chosen a civilization, it's time to colonize. Gameplay begins when your ship lands on American soil (North or South) and you claim the land in the name of your motherland. Never mind the fact that some other schmoes just planted their flags on a different part of the continent — America's spoils go to he who settles best.

In the short term, you'll do the things you normally do in an RTS game: build a base, spawn and train units, and forage for resources. One big change from previous *Age* games is that it'll no longer be necessary to build drop-off centers for the three types of resources: food, wood, and coin. As soon as one of your villagers chops down a tree or shoots and skins a deer, its bounty will be immediately transferred to your reserves.

Resources will vary based on where you've landed. For example, buffalo will be plentiful in The Great Plains, while vegetation will dominate island maps. Still, Ensemble says that each area will be balanced — a civilization won't be immediately disadvantaged by a lack of resources as another is swimming in loot. The maps in multiplayer and skirmish modes will also be randomly generated, preventing voracious players from memorizing where all the good loot is.

Keeping the game fun is Ensemble's No. 1 priority — which is why it won't incorporate such historically accurate, but touchy, topics as slavery and genocide. Similarly, weather and daylight effects will affect the look of a map, but won't leave a mark on gameplay. After all, directing half-dead troops through a brutal winter in Valley Forge isn't as exciting as the history books might lead you to believe.

As you explore the land and scout out the location of your adversaries, you'll be faced with strategic decisions: Do you play for economic control or with a purely military focus?

"What makes games fun is making interesting decisions," Shelley points out, and raises your attitude toward America's Native American tribes as an example of one of those "interesting decisions." There'll be 12 or so tribes — like the Aztecs, Iroquois, Cherokee, Comanche, and Sioux — with whom you can ally by building a trading post next to their encampment. When you ally, the native civilization will join with your own, giving you access to cool new units, unique weaponry, and a special knowledge of the land, lifting some of your fog of war.

(If, like me, you think building alliances in real life must've been far more difficult than building a trading post, consider the alternative: Ensemble says it play-tested an elaborate and complex alliance scheme

No two housing demolitions are alike thanks to Havok physics.

Colonel George Washington leads the troops. They've been ordered not to giggle at his white pants.

Natural resources vary depending on the landscape. Mmm...buffalo meat!

HYSTERICAL FIGURES

We know that Colonel George Washington (left) will make a cameo in *Age of Empires III*, but what other important early American celebrities can we expect to see? Here are a few suggestions:

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
Let's see...he wears glasses, is a little overweight, and enacts elaborate stunts to solve puzzles — obviously a gamer.

SAMUEL ADAMS
Because *every* game can benefit from having a cold, refreshing Sam Adams. Enjoy him responsibly.

JOHN ELIOT
A missionary to the American Indians in the late 1600s. Also wrote the song "Rocket Man."

BETSY ROSS
Sewed the American flag *and* dated The Incredible Hulk. Sweet!

SQUANTO
Taught the Pilgrims how to survive in America; has regretted it ever since.

BENEDICT ARNOLD
Would make a powerful Hero/Anti-Hero unit that could switch sides during the course of a battle if the price was right.

that involved lots of diplomacy and bargaining. Not surprisingly, it wasn't much fun and was dropped after a day and a half.)

If you play economically, one strategy is to ally with as many indigenous peoples as you can find on the map, grab resources, and speedily advance your civilization through its "Ages" of progress to acquire better technology and defense. (Ensemble wouldn't discuss the Ages or how they'll affect your colony since the design hasn't been finalized, but I caught a peek at a couple of the titles that appeared during a round of play-testing. Unless there's some major re-jiggering in the next several months, expect at least four Ages: Discovery, Colonial, Industrial, and Imperial.)

Conversely, you can go full-out military, and put all your resources into building up a big army. Leverage the power of your Home City by putting experience points into researching new unit types and shipping over reinforcements in lieu of coin drops. And you can destroy the alliances of your opponents by destroying their trading posts. If you're really cut-throat, you might even hire some mercenaries through your Home City to fight on your side.

Each civilization will have similar buildings and units, but with a few key differences. For example, the French will be able to ally with natives more easily (it must be the accent) and tend to have more powerful militaries. The Spanish, on the other hand, start out with larger armies and can expect greater levels of support from their Home City. And because of the varied upgrades that can be unlocked through your Home City, two multiplayer competitors hailing from the same country may have very different units and abilities.

No matter how you play, though, a battle is almost inevitable — musket against musket, cannon against cannon. There is, however, another way to win the game. You can amass "Four of a Kind," such as allying with four different native tribes or by controlling four different trading posts. Like the strategy of building and protecting Wonders in *Age of Empires II*, this maneuver will give you an instant victory...all without firing a shot.

While naval combat will be part of gameplay, its emphasis is on ground battles in a diverse array of landscapes that includes forests,

We might've stayed awake during American History class if we had known about the ragdoll physics and collateral damage.

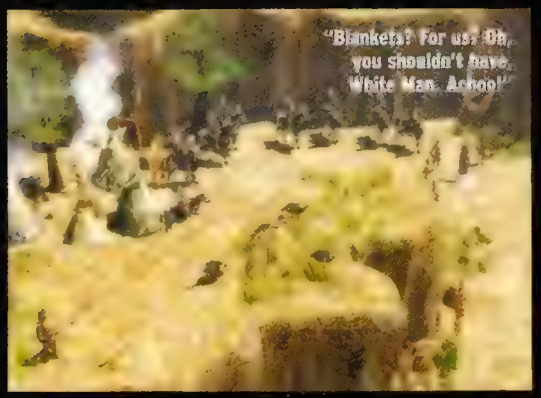
Troop formations will play a fundamental part in winning a battle. Protect your cannons at all costs! (Pikemen are expendable.)

The Westward Expansion pushes *Age III*'s storyline into the 1800s.

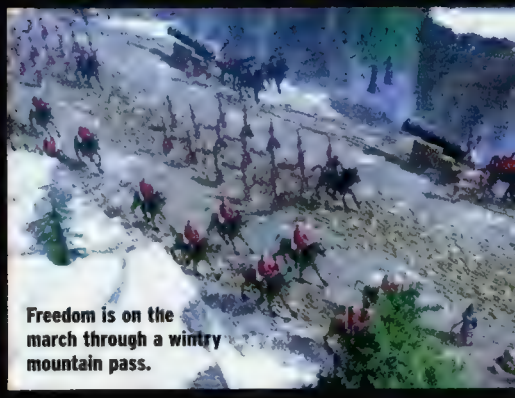
Train tracks eventually take the place of dirt-road trade routes.

"As soon as you wipe out this bison herd, we'll build the casino there."

The British Home City is London. Duh.



"Blankets? For us? Oh, you shouldn't have, White Man. Achoo!"



Freedom is on the march through a wintry mountain pass.

A fort protects an oceanside settlement from attack by sea. One full-time programmer was dedicated to *Age III*'s water effects.

snow-swept mountains, islands, and deserts. And taking a page from the console-game playbook, Ensemble is packing in an assortment of post-game awards to coat multiplayer matches with an additional layer of competition. You may lose the game but still win the award for "Most Kills" or "Most Resources."

Of course, Ensemble is still holding onto some secrets about its multiplayer plans. The team won't discuss gameplay modes except to say that there will be free-for-all and team-vs.-team matches supporting up to eight players over a LAN or the internet (though the devs recommend a maximum of four players to maximize the fun factor). And a single-player skirmish mode will let you battle AI-controlled opponents, although the game-balancing jury is still out as to whether you'll be allowed to level up a Home City in skirmish mode and then transfer it over to multiplayer bouts.

The Family Black

Another departure for the series is that *Age III*'s single-player campaign, composed of roughly 24 scenarios, will be divided into three Acts to form one epic storyline crossing multiple generations of a single family. The first act will follow the heroism of Morgan Black, a settler of Scottish descent who lands in North America circa 1500. Acts II and III will continue the story of his lineage as the family grows roots in American soil and traverses the often rocky path of colonial history up through 1850.

Ensemble describes the story as historical fiction (since the Black family, as conveyed in the game, never actually existed), although it will incorporate real-world events — like the American Revolution — and guest stars from American history such as a pre-presidency Colonel Washington.

Wondering what adventures await you? Well, Ensemble isn't spilling any details just yet, but did offer one scenario as an example: At one point, you'll have to prevent an enemy from traveling through the Rocky Mountains. To win, your demolition teams will need to set charges that will block your opponent's escape routes with a stream of rock and rubble, forcing him into a battle. Ensemble is aiming for a general playtime of 40 minutes per scenario.

A mixture of cut-scenes and in-game cinematics will tell the game's story, including hours of voiceovers and music recorded specifically for the game. The stirring score was written in-house, and incorporates a diverse array of different musical themes and styles influenced by movies such as *Last of the Mohicans* and *Cold Mountain*, including twangy folk ballads and a rousing orchestral suite performed by the Northwest Symphony. The soundtrack is also dynamic, so that when you launch an attack, the music will abruptly intensify to match the mood.

Ensemble has devoted six full-time designers to the single-player campaign — the most ever for a game designed by the studio. And it isn't just the writers and designers who hold sway over the final product: *everybody* who works at Ensemble must play *Age of Empires III* for at least one hour a week, and give their feedback, even if they're working on different projects. The team's philosophy is evident: playtest, playtest, playtest...and then playtest some more. They're resolved not to ship a game that has to be "fixed" through patches.

So if Ensemble's office mimics the Starship *Enterprise*, which was borne out of Gene Roddenberry's optimistic vision of a "wagon train to the stars," then *Age of Empires III* — telling the tale of Europe's wagon train to America — draws its inspiration from an equally bright source.

"The sun always shines in *Age of Empires*," says Bruce Shelley with a smile when asked why so many encounters are played out in broad daylight. It's a familiar motto for the team — in fact, someone else credits Shelley with the phrase before he even utters the words.

But his other favorite saying is law: "Differentiate and innovate, but don't imitate," declares Shelley. That mantra guides not only the look and feel of *Age of Empires III*, but also how Ensemble views its own ongoing mission. Because unlike most games in the usually grim, bloodthirsty RTS genre, *Age* games are chiefly about exploration and — dare I say it — hope.

AMERICAN HISTORY THROUGH THE EYES OF PCG

A historically incorrect look at our nation's landmark events

1492 Ordered to discover a country to which Spain can outsource its customer service, Christopher Columbus sets sail for India. Instead, he finds America. The real India will not be discovered until 1978.

1587 Sir Walter Raleigh establishes the first British Colony in Virginia. In 1591, the colony mysteriously vanishes, beginning America's longest continuous game of Hide & Go Seek.

1620 The Mayflower lands on Plymouth Rock, unleashing the first settlement of future Caucasian-Americans, the Pilgrims. The following year, they hold the world's first-ever LAN party with the native tribes. Future games are cancelled due to a smallpox epidemic.

1651 The Duke of Nukem comes to the New World to kick ass and chew tobacco leaves...and he's all out of tobacco leaves. Though he sires two offspring, a promised Duke of Nukem the Fourth earns the dubious title "Prince Vaporware" from restless natives.

1754 The French and Indian War erupts over publishing rights in the New World. It ends when France acquires all Native American tribes for an undisclosed sum.

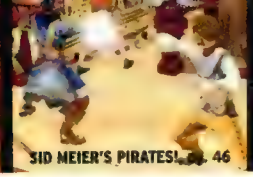
1775 The American Revolution begins when the first shots are fired at the Battle of Lexington. This conflict is fought and re-fought by "grognards," obsessed soldiers who brave poor graphics for liberty. The combat is resolved in 1,214 turns.

1776 Declaration of Independence signed. The missing manual for *Half-Life 2* is hidden on the back.

1812 The War of 1812 begins, marking the first U.S. war not to inspire a first-person shooter.

1844 First telegraph line in America is built between Baltimore and Washington. Unfortunately, it's powered by Steam — the first telegram takes six hours to authenticate and transmit.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT, pg. 44


SID MEIER'S PIRATES!, pg. 46

EVERQUEST II, pg. 76

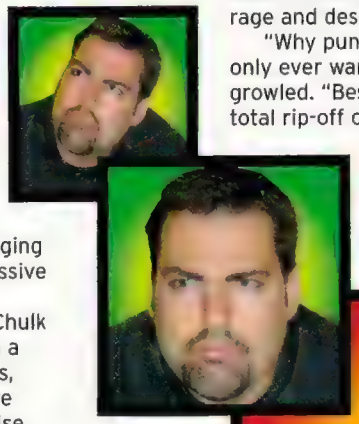
WHEN COMIC-BOOK COMPANIES ATTACK!

PAY UP, OL' GREENSKIN!

Marvel Comics sues *PC Gamer*'s "The Chulk" for license infringement, too much free publicity

When we last saw Chuck Osborn's extraordinarily angry alter-ego, The Chulk, the man-sized beast had cut a swath of terror and destruction toward Las Vegas in pursuit of the two things it loves most: smashing stuff and gorging on spectacular buffets.

But peace would not come easily for The Chulk. Comic-book giant Marvel Enterprises is suing The Chulk for allegedly ripping off Marvel's trademark "Hulk" character, accusing the rampaging creature of being an excessive and malicious homage.



Legal counsel to The Chulk denied any wrongdoing in a statement: "True Believers, these amazing charges are uncannily, fantastically false. Forsooth, my client will smash Marvel's astonishing allegations and disassemble the world's greatest wrongdoing. As The Chulk likes to say: It's clobberin' time!"

In November 2004, Marvel filed suit against Cryptic Studios and NCsoft, the creators of the superhero game *City of Heroes*, because the online RPG allegedly allows players to create heroes that are too similar to Marvel characters like Wolverine and Captain America, implying that the company owns the rights to body hair, claws, and shields. The Incredible Chulk, who was born through a fateful combination of alpha-beta rays and KFC's Popcorn Chicken, has only a passing similarity to Marvel's character "The Incredible Hulk." Unlike "The Hulk," our super-strong behemoth wears *rubber* toy Hulk hands and clearly starts his name with the letter C.

When finally reached for comment after an exhaustive search of the sumptuous Luxor Resort Hotel and Casino, The Chulk expressed rage and despair at news of the lawsuit.

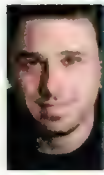
"Why puny suits want to hurt Chulk? Me only ever wanted to be left alone," The Chulk growled. "Besides, Hulk's speech pattern am total rip-off of Bizarro Superman.

"From now on, me be known as Ultimate Chulk!" the green-eyed beast bellowed, before smashing an orphanage full of puppies. "Take that, Marvel!"

PC GAMER PLAYLIST

DAN MORRIS As I type these words, I'm halfway through *Half-Life 2* (hey, that's alliterative), and all I have to say is, this game wasn't hyped enough. If I had it back to do over again, I'm not sure I'd have stopped at a 98% score.

COREY COHEN I love bloodsucker stories, so I've been all over *Vampire: Bloodlines*. When I can escape the mesmerizing Malkavians, I've also been appreciating the high-flipping action of *Prince of Persia: Warrior Within*. (See our review next issue!)



GREG VEDERMAN The Source engine has me in a deathgrip that I wouldn't dream of resisting. Between *Half-Life 2* and *Vampire: Bloodlines*, my PC is delivering a non-stop flow of good-time gaming that heralds the Age of Excellence.

CHUCK OSBORN All-consuming rage and litigation turn Chuck into The Incredible Chulk. So this month, Chulk smash stuff he hate. Chulk smash Steam! Chulk smash lag in *World of Warcraft*! Chulk smash cellophane tape on top of game box! RARRRRR!!!

D.J. STAPLETON I know what you're all expecting me to say: that I've been playing *Half-Life 2* like crazy and that it's the best game ever. Well, you're right...I'm predictable, so shoot me. Now I'm just waiting on the inevitable brilliant mods.

NORMAN CHAN I refuse to play *Half-Life 2* until I've decked out my system — I must enjoy the game in all its graphic glory! Until then, I've been getting my vamp on with *Vampire: Bloodlines*. Also, I'm running an awesome contest on *PC Gamer*'s website!

JOE MITCH I've been playing my choice for 2004 Game of the Year...and it doesn't involve Paragon City, Gordon Freeman, the *Doom 3* Marine, or large-breasted vampires. With *NHL Eastside Hockey Manager*, who needs the real NHL?

CHIAKI HACHISU Wow...I can't fweekin' believe it! I finally pried myself away from the crack-laden lifeblood called *City of Heroes* and started another game. Now I'm ColdLips, the sallow-faced warrior of the Undead in *World of Warcraft*. Grrrrrrr!

HOW WE RATE THE GAMES

90% 100%–90% EDITORS' CHOICE
It's not easy to get here, and games in this range come with our unqualified recommendation

80% 89%–80% EXCELLENT
These are excellent games. They're well worth buying, and each one is likely a great example of its genre.

70% 79%–70% GOOD
These are pretty good games that we'd recommend to fans of the particular genre, but better options exist

60% 69%–60% ABOVE AVERAGE
Reasonable, above-average games. They might be worth buying, but they probably have a few significant flaws.

50% 59%–50% MERELY OKAY
Very ordinary games. They're not completely worthless, but you can definitely find numerous better choices.

40% 49%–40% TOLERABLE
Poor quality. Only a few slightly redeeming features keep these games from the abyss of the next category.

30% 39%–0% DON'T BOTHER
Just terrible. These games are the electronic equivalent of a duet sung by William Shatner and William Hung

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VITAL STATS

DEV Blizzard ■ PUB Blizzard/Vivendi ■ REQ PIII/Athlon 800MHz, 256MB RAM, 4.0GB HD, 32MB 3D card with hardware T&L, internet
■ WE RECOMMEND P4 2GHz, 1GB RAM, 128MB 3D card, broadband ■ MAX. PLAYERS Massively multiplayer ■ ESRB RATING T

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

After entering this World, you may leave the real one behind

■ Blizzard mixes humor and pop-culture references throughout the game, as in this clash with the giant monster "Gahz'rilla."

With the rich world and lore created by the *Warcraft* RTS games, it seemed a no-brainer that their makers would have plenty of fodder for building a compelling massively multiplayer RPG. And Blizzard has proven once again why they're, well, Blizzard — *World of Warcraft* delivers on the promises of quality and excellent game design made over the title's long development period.

The game injects you into the universe some time after the events of *Warcraft III*. The uneasy truce that held between the Horde and the Alliance has crumbled despite the remaining scars of the Burning Legion's attack upon the world of Azeroth.

As in most MMOs, you begin your journey by selecting from among eight races (gnome, dwarf, human, night elf, undead, orc, troll, tauren) and nine classes (druid, hunter, rogue, warrior, mage, warlock, priest, paladin, shaman). And, as in most MMOs, you'll then start slaughtering various flora and fauna to rack up experience and loot.

Though it's not entirely new to the genre, *WoW*'s quest system means you'll be doing these activities with a purpose and not just standing around mindlessly grinding XP. For instance, troglodytes have become a plague upon the land, so a dwarven guard gives you a quest to help push back their advance. After successfully killing a certain number of these creatures, you're given another quest to assassinate their leader, who resides deep within a nearby cave.

In addition to fleshing out thousands of plotlines, quests offer bonus experience, plus a cash or gear reward. Common quests are simple assassination missions, collection errands, courier quests, and escort quests. In short, the leveling process is by far the most fun of any MMOG released to date.

Trade skills such as blacksmithing, alchemy, tailoring, enchanting, and the like all provide significant gameplay elements, while also contributing to the world economic system. This economy is aided by a convenient in-game mail system for sending money, items, and messages, as well as an auction house for buying and selling wares of all sorts.

MMOs are a famously overwhelming genre in terms of interface complexity, but Blizzard has taken steps to make *WoW* the perfect "Fisher-Price" MMO, with an interface design that is amazingly elegant and intuitive. Everything in this interface is drag-and-droppable, so you can simply open your ability window and drag an ability to where you want it on one of the task bars. Same thing goes for item use: Just drag to your bar the item you want to activate or equip on the fly, and it's now a part of the hotbar interface. Inviting people to groups is as easy as targeting them and right-clicking. Loot rules are set in the very same way. But even if you're an experienced MMO player, you'll find the interface powerful in terms of its customization and macroing options.

Graphicswise, you'll either love the game or hate it, especially compared to *EverQuest II*'s hyper-real approach. Personally, I love *WoW*'s stylized visuals. Its relatively lower-poly-count models were designed so that you could have dozens of monsters and players onscreen at once — essential for large player-versus-player (PvP) battles (which are among the most enjoyable elements of the game, despite bind-

Griffins, hippogriffs, zeppelins, and boats offer rapid transportation.

Cities for each realm provide protection from raids by the rival faction.

The Pit of Refuse
Who doesn't love sumo wrestling with Troll demi-gods?
[Party] Shem: storming bac here btw
[Party] Shem: er bad
[Party] Enss: sooth works on boss
[Party] Svenice: pull lurk?
[Party] Enss: let me sooth him and we can try
[Party] Svenice: heh hit pet for 280
Babycakes says: Attack!
[Party] MammothJr: baby...where you get your boots from?
MammothJr performs Taunt on Atal'alarion.
Hukdoom hits Atal'alarion for 20.
Hukdoom casts Torment on Atal'alarion.
MammothJr hits Atal'alarion for 26.
Hukdoom attacks. Atal'alarion dodges.
Atal'alarion hits Hukdoom for 251.
Babycakes's Holy Strike hits Atal'alarion for 305.
Hukdoom hits Atal'alarion for 19.
Babycakes hits Atal'alarion for 105.

rushing and corpse-camping issues on PvP servers) and some very interesting scripted player-versus-environment (PvE) events. *Half-Life 2* this ain't, but the quality of the presentation and the overall polish of the world are second-to-none in the genre.

Despite missing some elements that were promised at launch — most notably hero classes and PvP battlegrounds — *WoW* still offers thousands of hours of gameplay out of the box. The amount of content created in terms of lands to explore, quests to complete, instanced events, and gear to acquire is mind-blowingly huge, and larger than that in any MMO I've seen at launch.

The gameplay experience for most classes is more kinetic than we've seen in prior games, in that you're always doing something in the battle depending on what your class' role is. Warriors and rogues have lots of special moves to perform in combat (more than in *Dark Age of Camelot*), many of which can be done only at certain times, so you're never just hitting auto-attack and walking away. To complement their standard heal-bot duties, Priests have many offensive weapons and offensive duties to perform. All classes will kept busy in grouping situations, especially at higher levels.

One of the nice elements of *WoW*'s design is that every class is capable of soloing to some degree. Though most of the best gear and quests in the game will necessitate grouping (and raiding, which involves forming groups of multiple groups), it's nice to be able to have some alone time when you need it, or at least not be standing around for hours trying to find a group, as is required in many MMOs. Again, this design choice makes *WoW* a good gateway product for MMO newbies.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, guilds from other MMOs have been migrating to *WoW* en masse with an eye on the raids slated for the end-game. Though much of the raid content has yet to be discovered, a raid system allowing for up to 40 players is implemented so that large-scale encounters can meet the needs of those players. If the lower-level, single-group instances are anything to judge by, then the scripted raid encounters should be very special.

Regrettably, *WoW* is no exception to the norm of MMOs launching in semi-complete form. Issues of class balance in both PvP and PvE play remain unresolved. For example, hunters have little group utility beyond high damage; warriors are PvP fodder compared to paladins; pets need some work with regard to damage scaling and risk of use; and shamans seem to be a bit overpowered across the board. Other issues include general server performance and stability issues; queuing just to play (because some servers are overpopulated); and Blizzard's BitTorrent patch-distribution system, which often requires fiddling with your router ports. Given how long *WoW*'s closed beta and open beta were, plus Blizzard's reputation for quality, it's surprising to see the game launched in this state.

Ultimately, though, L33T players and noobs alike will find something in *World of Warcraft* to love. By merging some of the genre's best ideas with the appealing *Warcraft* mythos, the game could well become the first "mainstream" MMO. ■ **CHRISTIAN SVENSSON**

PC GAMER | FINAL VERDICT

HIGHS Oozes Blizzard polish; great fun; intuitive interface; solo-friendly.

LOWS Shaky launch; some unbalanced classes.

BOTTOM LINE After a rocky first few days, *WoW* is up and running at full steam, kicking axe over the competition.

91%

EDITORS' CHOICE

DEVELOPER Firaxis PUBLISHER Atari REQUIRED PIII 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 32MB VRAM, 1.2GB HD
WE RECOMMEND P4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB VRAM MAXIMUM PLAYERS 1 ESRB RATING E

SID MEIER'S PIRATES!

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

Yo ho ho and a bottle o' rum...old-time pirating returns to the PC

We all have an old favorite game we'd like to experience again, only with a complete graphical makeover to bring it up to the times. And, if you've been playing games on the PC since the late '80s, odds are that your Game X is *Sid Meier's Pirates!*

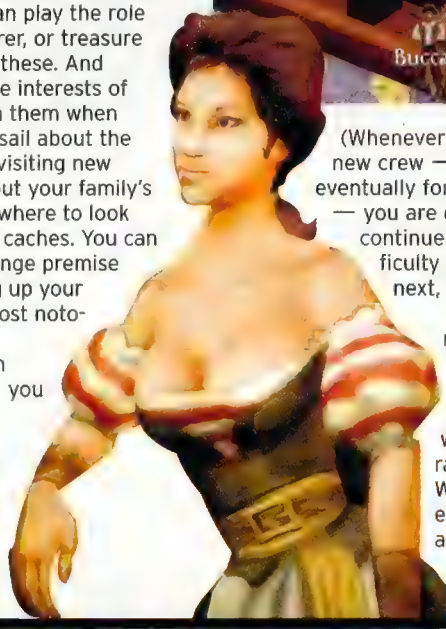
You can count yours truly in this group, and this remake represents my prayers answered. Heck, Sid didn't even mess with the name in issuing this revamp of his cult classic of yore. *Sid Meier's Pirates!* (Part II) captures all of the old-school flavor and charm of the original, and brings the Caribbean to life once more with resplendently colorful 3D graphics, surround sound, and an updated period musical score.

Other than that, and a few new mini-games, the new *Pirates!* follows the same basic formula as its 1987 forebear, and that's a very good thing.

Once again, you're thrust into the green boots of a budding sea captain out to avenge his family, who've been imprisoned by an evil Spanish nobleman. You start with a small ship and crew and enough gold to buy the basics, and you're off and sailing.

Pirates!'s greatest strength is how incredibly open-ended it is. You can play the role of pure pirate, trader, explorer, or treasure hunter — or a mix of all of these. And you can set out pursuing the interests of the Spanish, only to turn on them when the moment suits you. You sail about the Caribbean discovering and visiting new ports in search of clues about your family's fate, as well as hints about where to look for various hidden treasure caches. You can even totally ignore the revenge premise and focus solely on building up your reputation as the world's most notorious pirate.

Combat is extremely fun and very easy to control — you can play the entire game using just your keyboard's Numpad. However, don't let this simplicity fool you into thinking that combat is easy, because it becomes very challenging as you advance difficulty levels.

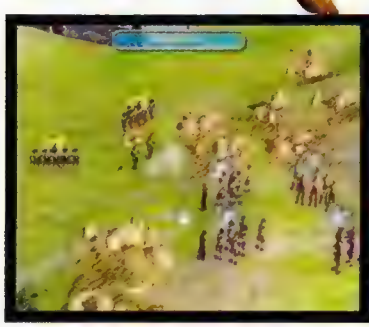


(Whenever you turn over a new crew — morale erosion eventually forces you to do this — you are given the choice to continue at the current difficulty level, advance to the next, or retire.)

In sea battles, you'll maneuver your ship into position to fire the most effective broadsides, taking wind direction and range into account. When you board another ship you'll face off against the opposing captain, and if he's got more crew, he'll have the advantage. Here's where the game gets a bit "twitchy" — you'll need to be quicker with your sword to win the day and plunder the ship.

My few complaints: On the later difficulty levels, it's extremely hard to recruit and maintain the large crew you need to sail the game's bigger ships. I also wish you could name your own save-points, which would make it much easier to play multiple careers simultaneously. And there are no multiplayer options.

Thankfully, these are minor quibbles. *Sid Meier's Pirates!* is once again king of the high seas, and a must-own game. Just make sure you have the time to play it, because if you don't, your career, love life, and personal hygiene may suffer. ■ STEVE KLETT



FAR LEFT: When you attack a town, your men are deployed ashore and you engage the enemy soldiers in turn-based combat. LEFT: Don't go for the board-and-duel until you've whittled down the opposing crew with grapeshot.

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT

HIGHS Very open-ended; detailed graphics; addictively simple gameplay.

LOWS No multiplay; crew recruitment tough on higher difficulty levels; can't name save-points.

BOTTOM LINE Sid's classic is reborn, and made better in the process. A must-buy.

91%

EDITORS' CHOICE

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DEVELOPER EA Los Angeles PUBLISHER EA REQUIRED PIII 1.3GHz, 4GB HD, 256MB RAM (512MB for three-plus players), 32MB GeForce2 GTS or RADEON 7500 chipsets WE RECOMMEND P4 2GHz, 128MB 3D card MAXIMUM PLAYERS 8 ESRB RATING T

LEFT: Keep Knights under a tight rein so they don't launch suicide attacks. BELOW: Things can get hairy during the defense of Minas Tirith, but if you can hold on long enough, this army of the dead will reinforce your troops. BOTTOM: Use the Nazgul to smash the buildings of Minas Tirith and terrorize the inhabitants.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH

To crush humans or slay Orcs? Each so very tempting...

Developing a game based on a hit movie is always a dicey proposition, but perhaps never more so than with *Battle for Middle-Earth*. After all, it's based not on one movie, but on *three* — and those three happen to form the biggest cinematic success story of the last decade.

The challenge for EA was to make a game that delivered the production values expected by the potentially massive number of moviegoers who might pick up the game — and for many of them it could well be their *first* real-time strategy game — yet still please the base market of veteran RTS players eager to immerse themselves in Tolkien's rich universe.

That's a real tightwire act, but EA Games has pulled it off here. Will longtime fans of the *LOTR* books and movies find areas to complain about? You betcha. Will hardcore RTS fans describe it as the ultimate accomplishment in the genre? No way. But the vast majority of folks who enter the sprawling world of Middle-earth — whether to save it or enslave it, since you can fight as the forces of either Good or Evil — will be greatly entertained.

Since this is the *battle* for Middle-earth, you won't find much in the game drawn from the first film — and what *is* included makes for a limp start to the Good campaign. Controlling Gandalf, Gimli, Aragorn, Legolas, Boromir, and the Hobbits, you make your way through the halls of Moria and eventually face the Balrog. What you learn from this outing is that it's a real pain to control the special powers of five heroes in the heat of frantic combat, and you'll learn instead to assign a default action for all but a couple of them. Gandalf's climactic battle with the Balrog is a shoot-and-dodge sham that doesn't exactly leave you with high hopes for things to come.

But once you're out of Moria, the action improves drastically, as the game moves squarely into the traditional RTS realm of collecting resources, building armies, and smashing the enemy. Gandalf's guys use a single renewable resource — farming — while Saruman's minions rack up spending points with lumber mills, furnaces, and slaughterhouses.

Unit types for both sides include infantry, cavalry, archers, "artillery" (mechanized trebuchets and catapults, or Ents and Trolls that can hurl boulders to smash men and fortifications), and even airborne forces (Nazgul and Eagle allies become available later in the game). Purists will complain about an incomplete variety of units, but the truth is, just about every possible unit type from the *LOTR* universe can be found here.

More problematic is the Command Cap, which limits the number of forces you can control at once. Though you can increase the limit with certain victories, you'll still find yourself in major battles in which it's difficult to assemble enough forces at one time to achieve critical mass and steamroll a major enemy fortification.

Standing at the head of these forces are Heroes — 14 in the Good campaign and a mere four when you seek to gain the One Ring — that appeared in the movies. Use them frequently in combat, and their special abilities will increase in number and power. But that's about the only reason you'll care for them, as a Resurrect capability has considerably cheapened their presence. During one mission, for instance, you have the chance to save Boromir as he buys time for the Hobbits by beating back an Orc

Boromir's situation doesn't look too good: he's pinned down by a spell and has about a dozen crossbows ready to make him a pincushion.

army. Save him, and you've departed from the events of the film — but if you don't, you can Resurrect him or any other slain heroes.

With its limited resource-gathering and building options, the focus of *BFME* is squarely on the battlefield — good news for anyone who likes carnage on a grand scale. The combat animations are smooth and convincing: Orcs and Uruks hurtle through the air as they're plowed over by Gondorian Knights; Mountain Trolls wave tree trunks as if they were Louisville Sluggers; and Ents who've been set afire by flame arrows begin a dance of death as they seek water to stop the pain.

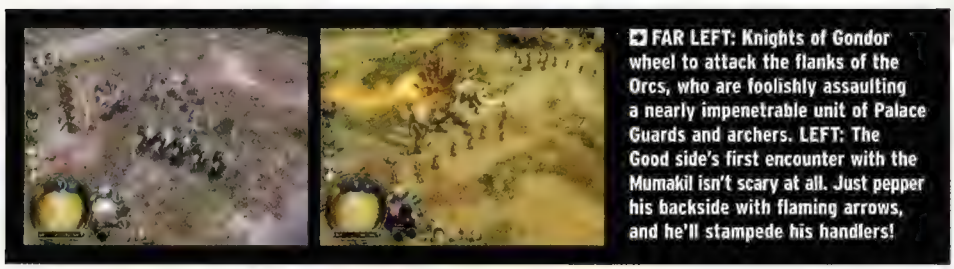
There's a strong emphasis on employing the correct units and tactics against foes. Few horsemen survive after plunging into a tightly boxed group of pikemen, for example, while Palace Guards impervious to frontal assaults can be felled with a smashing blitz from the rear. The ability to arrange battalions in sensible formations (e.g., wedge for horsemen, square for infantry) and to upgrade individual battalions gives you even more control over the outcome.

But the battlefield is also where you'll find some of the game's flaws. One of the most puzzling stems from a good feature: the ability to combine different unit types to create a more powerful force. Combine Gondorian Archers and Palace Guards, for example, and you have an arrow-spitting machine that can absorb incredible punishment. But once joined, they can never be split into single units — which you'll often wish you could do. A similarly weird design decision is that archers can occupy towers but never leave them.

Most discouraging of all, however, are some bizarre AI routines: troops on both sides will stand idly by as they're peppered with arrows, oblivious as their comrades fall one by one. I don't think it's too much to ask that you can set the stance of battalions so they'll retreat in those cases, but at the very least they should fight back!

Skirmish mode will prepare you for the game's online component, which features online stats, ladder play, and a Quick Match option to find the best opponent based on skill level *and* ping time (hooray!). But you're pretty much hamstrung when it comes to configuring these matches: there are no options for changing the number of capture points, settlements, or creature lairs. Plus, a replay feature is much-needed here (it is available for online games), so that newcomers can learn from the computer's techniques.

Battle for Middle-Earth won't challenge *Rome: Total War* or *Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War* for the RTS crown this year. But what it lacks in complexity, it more than makes up for with intense action and an ease of play that consistently draws you back for more. ■ **STEPHEN POOLE**



FAR LEFT: Knights of Gondor wheel to attack the flanks of the Orcs, who are foolishly assaulting a nearly impenetrable unit of Palace Guards and archers. LEFT: The Good side's first encounter with the Mumakil isn't scary at all. Just pepper his backside with flaming arrows, and he'll stampede his handlers!

PC GAMER | FINAL VERDICT

HIGHS Nearly transparent interface; engrossing battle animations; nice dash of RPG elements.

LOWS Occasionally bewildering AI; too few options for skirmishes; schizophrenic use of Heroes.

BOTTOM LINE The combat's so fast-paced and compelling, it's easy to forget any complaints.

86%

EXCELLENT

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VITAL STATS

DEVELOPER EA Canada **PUBLISHER** EA Sports **REQUIRED** PIII 700MHz, 128MB RAM, 1.8GB HD, 32MB 3D card
WE RECOMMEND P4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card, dual-analog gamepad **MAXIMUM PLAYERS** 8 **ESRB RATING** E

NBA LIVE 2005

Not as entertaining as Kobe vs. Shaq, but still a lot of fun

The Slam Dunk Contest is great fun, especially because there are so many unique types of dunks you can pull off. It'll take you a while to master the tomahawk dunk, but it'll be worth it when you shame your friends with your mad skillz.

From: Team Owner
Subject: Congratulations
Date: April 30, 2006
I just wanted to congratulate you and the team for securing a playoff spot. I'm confident that we can make a solid playoff run.

Your PDA offers messages from your own team and the rest of the league. I'm glad that my owner approves of my winning record!

Last year's *NBA Live* represented a vast improvement over its predecessors, and the 2005 edition continues the upward trend.

Several new features have been brought to the series, including an improved dynasty mode and the NBA All-Star Weekend. I'm a hardcore dynasty junkie, so that mode always holds the most appeal for me, and by and large it delivers the goods. You get scouting reports on the rookie class and can trade to move around on draft day, which adds tension and fun to the draft process.

On-court gameplay is very solid. The controls are intuitive and easy to pick up (though a dual-analog gamepad remains a must-have), and it's very easy to call offensive and defensive plays (like switching from a 2-3 zone to full-court man-to-man). You have plenty of plays to choose from, so you can customize them based on the strengths of your team. Got Shaq? The low-post offense is for you.

The defensive AI remains weak, especially in the paint. On several occasions I had three defensive players in position to make a stop and the player with the ball would run right past them for the slam dunk with nary a challenge. Other quaffs include players ignoring loose balls (as they roll out of bounds, no less) and lame back-court violations that also plagued last year's version.

As you simulate games, you can jump directly into the action and take control (if you find your team losing to a team that you should be throttling, for example), and all of the league information is now presented via a PDA that stores all of your email from league and team officials.

The PDA is a good idea, but sometimes it's an annoying nuisance. When you're mired in a 10-game losing streak, do you really want to take the time to read emails from the team owner that ask you why you haven't been reading his emails? That's just lame.

Still, I thoroughly enjoyed the dynasty mode, especially since I was able to take my beloved Cleveland Cavaliers and, in two seasons — through some smart free-agent acquisitions like Reggie Miller and Latrell Sprewell — turn them into a playoff team.

The most-hyped new addition is the All-Star Weekend. In this mode you can play the Rookie Challenge and participate in the Three-Point Shootout, the Slam Dunk Contest, and the All-Star Game itself. There's a lot of entertainment to be found in the Slam Dunk Contest as you craft dunks with the gamepad.

There are loads of online options, too, including tournaments and ranked play, and for the most part the game runs very smoothly over a DSL connection. The biggest problem with online play is that it's far too easy to dominate with a single player. For example, in one game, the opposing player used Steve Nash to riddle me for 34 points. I tried every defense, and nothing stopped him. (On the flipside, there was nothing *he* could do to stop LeBron James, so it degenerated into a race to get down the court with your unstoppable guy and score.) That kind of imbalance needs to be addressed.

NBA 2005 still isn't perfect, and it takes a step back in a few places, but it's an easy recommendation to basketball fans. Here's hoping that this franchise will continue its winning streak. ■ WILLIAM HARMS

This year's graphics are quite impressive — everything from the players to the court looks outstanding. I just wish the game supported resolutions above 1280x1024.

PC GAMER | FINAL VERDICT

HIGHS Sharp graphics, smooth gameplay, solid dynasty mode, plenty of online game options

LOWS AI missteps are too common; PDA gets annoying; star players are over-powered

BOTTOM LINE If your beer gut keeps you off the hardwood, play out your dreams right here.

82%

EXCELLENT

GENRE: **ADVENTURE**

BAD MOJO REDUX

Papa Roach's return is buggy — in the really good way

VITAL STATS

- **DEVELOPER** Pulse Entertainment
- **PUBLISHER** Got Game Entertainment
- **REQUIRED** PIII 800MHz, 128MB RAM, 50MB HD
- **WE RECOMMEND** The required specs are bug-arific
- **MAXIMUM PLAYERS** 1
- **ESRB RATING** T

Not many games warrant a pixel-by-pixel re-release nearly eight years after their debut, but then again, few remain as freakishly inventive or as thoroughly enjoyable as 1996's "roach game," *Bad Mojo*.

With Kafka-meets-adventure-game irony, you play as an entomologist magically transformed into a cockroach. Returning to human form entails an epic quest over greasy stovetops and through scummy pipes, dodging predators such as spiders and cats.

Still classy as ever.

But *Redux* isn't just an old game re-bundled in budget ($19.99) packaging: A bonus DVD packs in a couple hours' worth of extras, including a fascinating making-of documentary (with audition scenes and refreshingly honest creator interviews); developer commentary on the game's FMV movies; concept art and storyboards; and video hints for solving the puzzles.

The downside is that, except for its Windows XP compatibility and FMV upgrade to 24-bit color, the game is presented in its original 8-bit color, 640x480-resolution "glory." Scene transitions take too long, and the 20-percent-larger movies emphasize the over-the-top acting. Too bad — if any game deserves George Lucas-style tampering, it's this one. Hopefully, as Producer Alex Louie opines, the band will "get back together" for a *Bad Mojo 2*. ■ **CHUCK OSBORN**

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT **84%** EXCELLENT

GENRE: **STRATEGY**

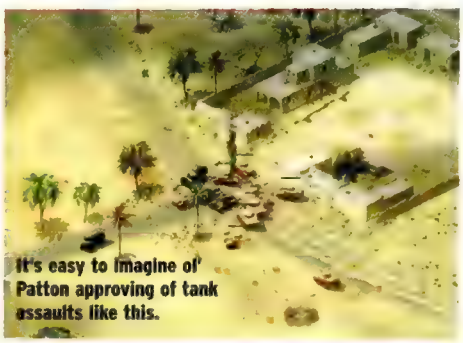
BLITZKRIEG: ROLLING THUNDER

"No bastard ever won a wargame by dying for his country"

VITAL STATS

- **DEV** La Plata Studios/Nival Int.
- **PUB** CDV Software
- **REQUIRED** PIII 700MHz, 128MB RAM, 1.3GB HD, 16MB D3D-capable 3D card
- **WE RECOMMEND** P4 2.0GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB D3D-capable 3D card
- **MAXIMUM PLAYERS** 1
- **ESRB RATING** T

More-of-the-Same Syndrome afflicts *Blitzkrieg: Rolling Thunder*. This new standalone add-on for CDV's World War II RTS franchise is so much like the *previous* standalone add-on (*Burning Horizon*), warts and all, that I came down with serious déjà vu during this review.



It's easy to imagine ol' Patton approving of tank assaults like this.

New here are an 18-mission solo campaign based on the Dubya-Dubya-Too exploits of General George S. Patton, plus eight new custom missions. But La Plata Studios hasn't addressed *Burning*'s shortcomings, so the microscopic interface, horrible unit pathfinding, and MIA multiplay are all back by unpopular demand.

The solid combat engine helped me forget these flaws. You get loads of units and objectives, tanks have armor ratings, air cover is vital for large-scale assaults, and terrain plays such a major factor that I prevailed in Sicily and Siberia solely because I had anti-tank guns dug in on hills.

Improved AI adds to the challenge. The trick of taking out numerous gun emplacements with snipers has been voided, as enemies now send search-and-destroy teams after snipers.

Rolling Thunder is a rehash with a flawed engine, but its sense of battlefield tactics is appealing. Consider it if you've never tried this series before. ■ **BRETT TODD**

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT **69%** ABOVE AVERAGE

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WEB DESIGN	DATABASE MANAGEMENT

VITAL STATS

DEVELOPER EA Canada ■ PUBLISHER EA Games ■ REQUIRED PIII 933MHz, 256MB RAM, 2GB HD, 32MB 3D card
WE RECOMMEND P4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card, joystick/wheel ■ MAXIMUM PLAYERS 6 ■ ESRB RATING E

Hit the nitrous button, and the world becomes blurry-licious.

BELOW: The new Downhill Drift mode challenges you to execute wild slides and stunts while avoiding oncoming traffic. BOTTOM: There's no car damage, so collisions are a mere inconvenience.

NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND 2

EA's best-selling racer of all time gets a serious tune-up

Electronic Arts is fast becoming the General Motors of arcade-racing games. *Need for Speed Underground* sold more than 8 million copies across all platforms last year, making a sequel as inevitable as GM's 2005 model line. *Need for Speed Underground 2* is a worthy continuation of this tuner-car franchise, with gobs of additional horsepower and lots of room to crack the throttle.

That extra geography is evident right from the get-go. *NFSU 2* takes place in a fictional free-roaming city that features over 125 miles of road interconnecting five unique, gorgeously rendered districts. It's triple the size of *NFSU*. It'll take you several hours to unlock all these areas, and even longer to reveal all of the tunable cars and scores of aftermarket mods that are up for grabs.

Twenty-nine licensed vehicles from manufacturers such as Ford, Honda, Toyota, and Audi are all available for a spin, and you can painstakingly transform each machine into a gleaming, tire-smoking piece of automotive art.

Though tire grip remains conspicuously overstated — and vibration effects are more "rumble pad" than true force-feedback — the vehicle dynamics are noticeably improved from those in the first game, and they now communicate a palpable sense of weight transfer and body roll. (The on-the-fly performance-tuning feature is another great addition.) Gameplay modes offer a mélange of street racing, stunt driving, drag racing, parking-lot sprints, one-on-one challenges, and road-course events.

The six-person LAN/internet multiplayer game plays smoothly enough via a broadband connection, and the open-ended career mode (featuring *Wild On*'s Brooke Burke in a graphic-novel backstory) can be played out at your own pace as you cruise the streets of "Bayview" in your increasingly tricked-out ride.

The cars have no damage modeling, which removes any sense of consequence from your high-speed missteps (sending a bizarre message for wannabe street racers!), and the missing cockpit view is a regrettable console-game carryover. But even sans dashboard art, *Underground 2*'s visuals are stunning. The nocturnal city is an impressive living environment, with perpetually gridlocked streets, dramatic vistas, and intricately detailed neighborhoods. The dynamic weather effects — e.g., blurry waterdrops obscure the screen in the rain — are sublime, and the game delivers a convincing sense of speed from the drop of the clutch to the press of the nitrous button. A replay screen has also been added, addressing one of the more glaring oversights in the original game.

NFSU 2 power-slides tantalizingly close to arcade-racing perfection. The emergent gameplay premise — in which you must physically navigate a bustling, dynamic city to unearth races, rivals, and upgrades — is addictive. The customization options are legion, AI difficulty can be adjusted on the fly, and the spectacular eye candy more than lives up to the series' well-established standards. If EA can work in some car damage, a hardcore physics option, and some proper cockpit views for the next chapter, this franchise will leap into a league of its own. ■ ANDY MAHOOD

PC GAMER | FINAL VERDICT

PROS Huge free-roaming environment; dozens of licensed cars and upgrades; gorgeous visuals.

LOWS No damage modeling; poor force-feedback; no cockpit view.

BOTTOM LINE A worthy, high-horsepower successor to last year's popular arcade racer.

88%

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VITAL STATS
DEV Blue Fang Games PUB Microsoft REQUIRED PIII 733MHz, 256MB RAM, 900MB HD, 16MB 3D card WE RECOMMEND P4 1.6GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MD 3D card, internet access for optional downloadable content MAXIMUM PLAYERS 1 ESRB RATING E

ZOO TYCOON 2

Even kids get tired of being at the zoo after a few hours

Children are the biggest draw at a zoo, and the only way to keep them and their parents happy is to give them a place to play when they're not looking at animals. Just do your best not to expose them to uncaged rhinos.

Zoo Tycoon won a lot of accolades from educators and parents for its blend of instruction and entertainment, with only a few dissenters (this fine publication being one of them). We thought it was monotonous and generic (*PCG* rating: 48%). For the sequel, developer Blue Fang Games decided to liven things up a bit by giving you the ability to step out of the front office and not only mingle with the masses, but also take a hands-on approach to the care and feeding of the critters.

Unfortunately, the "thrills" of scooping hippo dung and watching guests explore your zoological complex wear off quickly, leaving us in the same boat we were in the first time.

A typical day at the zoo: the monkey's impersonating Jackson Pollock, and the zookeeper can't figure out how to get inside the monkey exhibit.

As you'd expect, *Zoo Tycoon 2* enables you to build a zoo literally from the ground up: a Habitat Editor lets you create hills, valleys, cliffs, and even waterfalls, while the Biome Brush automatically places the best plants, trees, rocks, and grasses for any given environment. But a successful zoo must meet the needs of its guests *and* its animals, and that means building paths, fences, restaurants and snack stands, restrooms, and so on. Basically, if you've seen it at a zoo, it's available for placement here.

All this stuff costs money, of course, and therein lies the game's only real challenge: you can buy only what you can afford (though in Free-form mode, you get unlimited cash and access to all animals and objects). Complicating efforts to balance the budget is the need to "research" items to gain access to new animals and objects. Additionally, each of the game's 17 campaign scenarios features other goals, such as keeping a certain animal happy and healthy for several months or helping the zoo achieve a particular level of fame.

This all sounds okay, but the devil is in the boring details. Take the construction interface, for instance. In a campaign scenario, you might be handed a zoo with walls that don't allow the guests to see the exhibits — but replacing the barriers means removing them *one section* at a time. *Oy!* Want to place a fence around a biome you've created? You'll have to manually "sell" (read: remove) any rocks, trees, or bushes that are in the way, rather than simply letting the construction automatically bulldoze. The lack of a speed-up clock option means you'll wait and wait for milestones to arrive, and the inability to cycle through animals, objects, and staff adds extra steps to a host of chores.

The new "Zoo Guest" and "Zookeeper" modes are essentially the same: a first-person perspective that lets you roam the zoo as a visitor, or duck into an exhibit to wash, feed, or care for animals. This feature is fun for a while, especially if you're lucky enough to observe some neat (or bizarre) animal behavior such as a lion pawing at a fence to reach a squirrel, or a bear who finally snaps for some unknown reason and mauls its mate. But your stroll is inevitably interrupted by the need to give orders to your dumb-as-rock employees.

As a result, *Zoo Tycoon 2* undulates between periods of manic maintenance and mundane management, with long stretches of ho-hum in between. Kids will probably find a marathon session of the *Animal Planet* channel just as informative and exciting. ■ STEPHEN POOLE

PC GAMER | FINAL VERDICT

PROS Gentle learning curve; interesting animal behavior; decent educational content.

CONS Frustrating terrain editor; unwieldy interface for object management; mundane management.

BOTTOM LINE Keeping animals and visitors happy while balancing the books wears thin awfully fast.

54%

MERELY OKAY

OTHER OPTIONS: THE SIMS 2 **85%**...IMMORTAL CITIES: CHILDREN OF THE NILE **82%**

GENRE: **WARGAME**

DRAGOON: THE PRUSSIAN WAR MACHINE

Are you cool enough for a *Horse & Musket* game?

VITAL STATS

- **DEVELOPER** BoKu Strategy Games
- **PUBLISHER** Shrapnel Games
- **REQUIRED** PII 300MHz, 128MB RAM, 350MB HD, 32MB 3D card
- **WE RECOMMEND** The required specs are ample
- **MAXIMUM PLAYERS** 1
- **ESRB RATING** Not rated

Doom 3 may sell a million units, but internet-distributed wargames are lucky to sell one-half of 1 percent of that. Nevertheless, games like *Dragoon* — the newest entry in the *Horse & Musket 2* series — continue to capture my imagination.

A turn-based re-creation of the battles of Frederick the Great, *Dragoon* lets you control regiment-sized (about 600-men) infantry and cavalry units and batteries of artillery (three to five guns) as they fight across hill and dale divided into hexes representing 75 to 150 yards of terrain. The small scale lets you get intimate with your formations. Morale matters, as does a leader's skill — all factors on the real battlefields of Frederick's time.

Dragoon's interface could use some polish: it's too easy to misdirect a unit. But once you've got the hang of them, the interface and game system work just fine. And to Shrapnel's everlasting credit, it's one of the few wargame publishers still packaging a manual with its games.

The graphics are expectedly low-tech, but charming nonetheless. Horses prance and musketeers charge gamely. *Dragoon* is a treat for those of us more hip than the mainstream crowd. ■ **MARK H. WALKER**

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 86% EXCELLENT

GENRE: **ONLINE REAL-TIME STRATEGY**

TIME OF DEFIANCE

They should call this genre "*really* real-time strategy"

VITAL STATS

- **DEVELOPER** Nicely Crafted Ent.
- **PUBLISHER** Strategy First
- **REQUIRED** PIII 800MHz, 256MB RAM, 300MB HD, 16MB 3D card, internet
- **WE RECOMMEND** P4 1GHz, 32MB 3D card, broadband connection
- **MAX. PLAYERS** Massively multiplayer
- **ESRB RATING** T

Stay up late and attack your neighbors while they sleep.

Recently released for the first time at retail, this two-year-old online-only RTS game lets dozens of players compete to build the largest, most powerful empire through trade and military might. Unlike in a typical MMO game, your bases and territory remain yours and can be attacked even when you're not online. You need to make sure your bases can defend themselves while you're asleep, or you could wake up to a conquered empire.

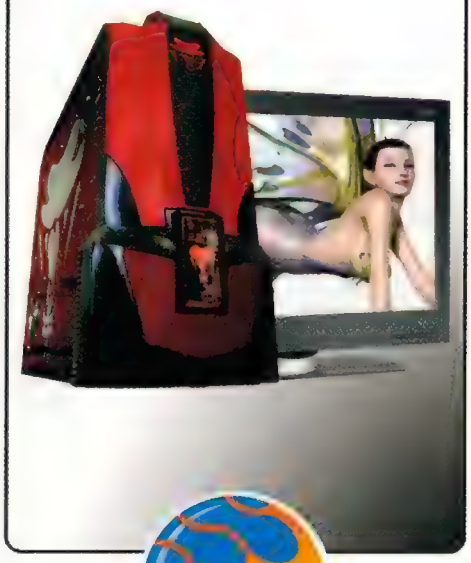
Staying ahead of the competition is all about getting the most resources, which you mine from odd floating islands at a painfully slow rate. Everything else happens extremely slowly as well — think of it as a regular RTS match, only stretched out over a period of two weeks. Usually you can give some orders — e.g., to build a ship or to move from one island to another — and then go get lunch before they're completed.

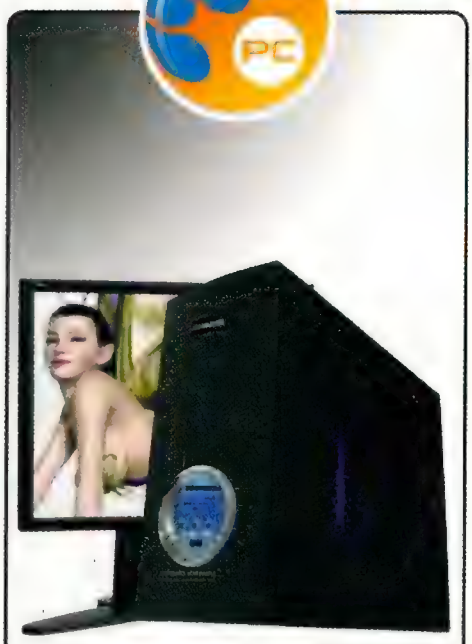
The graphics are extremely basic to the point of being ugly, but the simple visuals allow the game to run smoothly on old computers using a dialup connection.

If you're the super-strategic type, you'll appreciate the time to strategize provided by *ToD*'s lethargic pace. But if you're the slightest bit impatient, you'll be bored within five minutes. ■ **D.J. STAPLETON**

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 62% ABOVE AVERAGE

Pick Your Personality





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VITAL STATS

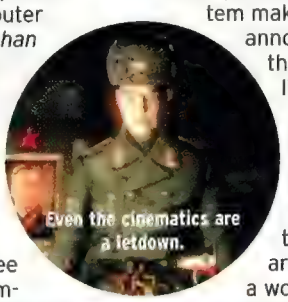
DEVELOPER TimeGate Studios PUBLISHER Atari REQUIRED PIII 1.5GHz, 256MB RAM, 1.4GB HD, 64MB DX 9.0c-capable 3D card
WE RECOMMEND P4 2.0GHz, 384MB RAM, 128MB DX 9.0c-capable 3D card MAXIMUM PLAYERS 8 ESRB RATING T

AXIS & ALLIES

With wargames like this, pacifism is starting to look pretty damn good

Like most game geeks of a certain age, I dedicated much of the late Eighties to the *Axis & Allies* board game. Larry Harris' design was so straightforward that the German invasion of Russia could be resolved by rolling six dice — yet it still had enough depth to intrigue wargamers.

Unfortunately, both of these qualities have been lost in the latest computer adaptation of this classic. The *Kohan* gurus at TimeGate Studios have tarnished the legendary franchise by ruining the simplistic elegance of the original design and including computer generals so dumb that they make Hitler look like a master tactician.


Even the cinematics are a letdown.

In many ways, this PC game is *Axis & Allies* in name only. Three of the four modes of play — campaign, custom skirmish, and multiplayer — center on a real-time combat engine lifted from *Kohan II* (*PCG* rating: 79%). While such sharing sounds like a great idea, *Kohan II*'s regimental system (in which you build and control groups of units instead of individuals) was geared for swords and spells, not five varieties of infantry, eight armored vehicles, and planes and ships.

The use of regiments flat-out neuters strategizing here: Each regiment usually contains many unit types, and this diversity makes it impossible to take advantage of unit specialties, such as the bunker-busting abilities of artillery tanks. It's best to just attack en masse, enjoy the nifty visuals and ka-booms, and let the computer sort out the intricacies.

Deciding which units to build is the most involving part of the RTS side of the game, but a clunky interface and a layered building system make this process teeth-grindingly annoying. The lone saving grace is the resource and supply system lifted from *Kohan II*, which nicely emphasizes the importance of World War II supply lines.

The other mode of play — simply called World War II — has a turn-based focus. As in the *A&A* board game, you build armies and conquer territories on a world map. There's an option to resolve battles in RTS combat, but the core concepts come straight from Milton Bradley.

Yet, this mode isn't enjoyable either, due to brain-dead AI. Computer commanders pour cash into technologies instead of building armies, which is fine to a point, but idiotic while my armor streams across the border. Because of this myopia, it's child's play to conquer Russia from Germany or Japan, or to storm Germany from Britain.

Also, by leaving territory undefended, you can sucker the computer into abandoning capitals. To get my Nazi hordes into London, all I had to do was vacate Scandinavia and wait for the limeys to take the bait. The Brits soon shipped their armies up there, inviting my Panzers into Piccadilly Square. Thanks, mate!

Just wait for the Brits to begin their holiday in Scandinavia, then send Panzers across the Channel.

Since the only victory condition is the capture of two enemy capitals, these AI holes make it impossible to lose. Well, almost impossible — the pathetic AI also afflicts your allies, so you have to guard against breath-takingly stupid moves. In one game where I was playing as the U.S., I watched helplessly as Britain inexplicably sent its entire army to Gibraltar, allowing Germany to end the game by taking the UK, Eastern Canada, and Washington in successive turns.

Multiplay is a superior experience to going solo, as even the most dimwitted human adversary can avoid the AI pitfalls. But World War II mode isn't supported in multiplay, so you're stuck with generic skirmishes in places like Normandy and Stalingrad.

Still, I can't get too upset with TimeGate. Even though this game is a disaster, it's awoken enough misty, watercolored memories that I've hauled out the *Axis & Allies* board game for the first time in years. And *that*'s fun. ■ BRETT TODD

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT

HIGHS Will make you nostalgic for the vastly superior board game

LOWS *Kohan II* engine works better with swords than with Stukas; suicidally stupid AI

BOTTOM LINE This PC translation is completely unworthy of the *Axis & Allies* name

35%

DON'T BOTHER

If that clown were holding up three fewer fingers, the game would be reviewing itself.

GENRE: **ADVENTURE**

SECRET OF THE SILVER EARRING

Exhibit A in why Sherlock Holmes was addicted to opium

Why is it so difficult to make a good Sherlock Holmes adventure? After playing this latest attempt, *Secret of the Silver Earring*, I think I have a pretty good clue.

Sherlock Holmes is fiction's greatest detective, a master of deductive reasoning who possesses near-supernatural observational skills. Then you have guys like *me*, who need a training video to tie their shoes in the morning. Chances are, you're no Sherlock, Sherlock — so this game's solution is to vacillate between treating you like an idiot savant...and a plain old everyday idiot.

In *Silver Earring*, you alternate between controlling Sherlock Holmes and his sidekick, Dr. Watson, as they investigate the shooting death of a construction tycoon. The gameplay is mouse-driven, so you point-and-click on locations to move and to pick up inventory items, and question witnesses via the mouse cursor.

Sleuthing is trial-and-error busywork. You click through dialogue trees, pixel-hunt the screen for evidence, and then analyze the clues back at your home lab on Baker Street as Holmes handholds your investigation. At times, he doles out step-by-step instructions. But occasionally he'll be irritatingly vague, like when he refuses to enter a house and won't say why.

Playing as Watson is even more brainless — when asked to research information in the library, all you have to do is click on the bookshelf three times and then click on the new pages in your inventory to prove that you've read them. There, you're done!

The old gray matter has been reserved for tacked-on brainteasers, courtesy of a crackpot puzzle inventor with a penchant for hiding clues inside his tedious creations. One of them, a checkerboard addition puzzle, is one long math problem that isn't so much difficult as dull.

But most insulting are the level-ending pop quizzes that test your case knowledge before you can continue. The quizzes make you back up your conclusions by matching the appropriate notes from your case file, meaning that you have to sift through pages of documents and interviews to uncover the salient details. Again — not fun.

Despite some attractive graphics, good voiceover acting, and a credible mystery, *Silver Earring* misses the point. The mystery is why you would insult yourself by playing it.

■ CHUCK OSBORN

VITAL STATS

- **DEVELOPER** Frogwares
- **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft
- **REQUIRED** PIII 600MHz, 256MB RAM, 1.5GB HD, 32MB 3D card
- **WE RECOMMEND** PIII 700MHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card
- **MAXIMUM PLAYERS** 1
- **ESRB RATING** T

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 24% DON'T BOTHER

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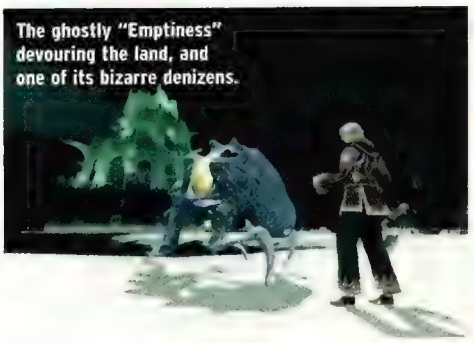
VITAL STATS
DEVELOPER Square Enix PUBLISHER Square Enix REQUIRED PIII 800MHz, 128MB RAM, 2GB HD, 32MB 3D card
WE RECOMMEND P4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card MAXIMUM PLAYERS Massively multiplayer ESRB RATING T

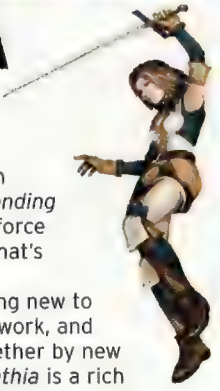

The ghostly "Emptiness" devouring the land, and one of its bizarre denizens.

Build a large, well-balanced party of vets before exploring the eight new territories.

Promathia's monsters lean toward the big, the bad, and the backbreaking.

FINAL FANTASY XI: CHAINS OF PROMATHIA

Better bring a dozen friends — this place is lethal!



When *Final Fantasy XI* hit North American stores, it was amazingly stable, packed with more meat than an Arby's Big Montana, and best of all, wasn't another slavish *Ever*-clone. It was also relatively easy for new players to learn and adjust to its intricate skill system before putting their necks on the block. Imagine my dismay when *Chains of Promathia*, the first expansion for the game released outside of Japan, does a complete 180 and drops a grand piano on your head.

To make a long story short, if you're not at least level-30 (which by definition implies you pretty much dig the game anyway), this add-on is definitely not for you. If you *are* at or above said level, prepare to be the game's whipping boy until you're pushing level 40-something. And since *Final Fantasy XI*'s system is based around leveling up multiple "jobs" (warrior, ninja, mage, and so on), you'll need a comfortable chair.

Don't plan on poking your virtual proboscis into the game's eight gorgeous new areas unless you're also packing a very large, very accomplished party. Building on the same complex story-driven, quest-based system that graced *Final Fantasy XI*, *Promathia* requires tremendous patience and coordinated team planning if you're going to plunder its many hidden treasures. Once you get your balance, however, there's plenty to enjoy: subterranean spelunking in the dank and cavernous Goblin city of Movalpolos, tropical aquaculture along sunny Bibiki Bay, many new and impressive-looking monsters, and a rip of a story (as in "ripped from *The Neverending Story*") about a terrible force called "the Emptiness" that's devouring the land.

Though it adds nothing new to the existing game framework, and should be avoided altogether by new players, *Chains of Promathia* is a rich content upgrade that'll please masochistic vets looking for the equivalent of Hercules' 12 labors. ■ MATT PECKHAM

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 75% GOOD

VITAL STATS
DEVELOPER GSC Game World PUBLISHER Ubisoft REQUIRED P4 1.5GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card
WE RECOMMEND P4 2GHz, 1.024GB RAM, 128MB 3D card MAXIMUM PLAYERS 7 ESRB RATING M

ALEXANDER

Bad movie, good game. Has the cosmos realigned?

Everybody knows that a good film doesn't necessarily translate into a good game. But *Alexander* suggests that a lousy film — in this case, Oliver Stone's abysmal epic — can be the basis for a pretty decent game.

Here the emphasis is on large armies — the game engine can handle as many as 64,000 units in a battle, and as many as 8,000 may be onscreen at any given time.

Alexander makes it easier to manage all your troops by letting you combine as many as 100 soldiers into tightly organized formations that you can select and command as one unit. These groups receive combat and morale bonuses, and of course, you can move and command several formations at once. The result is a reasonably effective balance between traditional RTS action in the *Warcraft* mold and the large-scale tactics of the *Total War* series.

In ancient times, victory went to whichever side could make the most perfect square.

Commanding your forces isn't always as easy as it is in those games, however. When you get into tight spots such as highly developed towns, for instance, control becomes a little tough: it's too easy to click in the wrong spot and end up attacking a harmless building instead of enemy troops. Part of this trouble arises from the limited control you have over the 3D map: you can zoom in and out, but there's not much difference between maximum and minimum zoom — and there's no way to rotate the map. Another problem lies in the fact that in-game text isn't resized as you increase resolution, so text messages become tough to read at higher resolutions.

Still, *Alexander* is a pretty solid RTS game. It's not a model of innovation, but it's certainly better than we've come to expect from movie-license tie-ins. ■ DAN BENNETT

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 77% GOOD

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VITAL STATS
DEVELOPER NovaLogic PUBLISHER NovaLogic REQUIRED PIII 1.2GHz, 512MB RAM, 2GB HD, DirectX 9-capable 3D card
WE RECOMMEND P4 3GHz, 1.024GB RAM, 128MB 3D card MAXIMUM PLAYERS 150 ESRB RATING M

JOINT OPERATIONS: ESCALATION

More toys = more fun

Many of the new maps have control points that are closer together. Less hunting for action.

Death comes suddenly and unexpectedly in war, as it did in *Joint Operations* — realistic, perhaps, but not necessarily a good condition in a videogame. It sucks having to schlep a half-mile to a battlezone, only to be capped by a sniper on a mountain. NovaLogic tries to address this issue and others via *Escalation*, a major expansion to its online FPS.

Despite new additions such as body armor and increased scope drift for snipers, death is still swift. It's the same case with the new vehicles, whether you're flying an Apache or driving a T-80U tank: Choppers are juicy prey for shoulder-launched Stingers, and tanks are easily taken out from a distance by the new Javelin anti-tank missile. The gunships and the battle tanks can dish out intense firepower and can turn the tide of battle if left unchecked, but they can be checked by anyone with half a brain.

Snipers are still a deadly pain in the ass, but thanks to the new dirt bike, you'll spend less time returning to the front line. This nimble vehicle can hold two soldiers at a time and is the quickest way to travel on land. Considering the size of the new maps (there are 25 of them), this fast means of transport is a blessing.

New weapons such as the G36 assault rifle and anti-tank mines all have their uses and are worthwhile additions. And the introduction of a parachute makes taking to the skies less hazardous. (As with every one of these additions, the parachute also makes *Joint Ops* feel more like the *Battlefield* games.)

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: the new Apache, dirt bike, M1A1 Abrams tank, and FN P90 submachinegun.

Escalation is a solid expansion. The new maps make getting into the heart of the battle much quicker and easier, and the new vehicles make battles go by much faster. While *Joint Ops* is beginning to show its age, *Escalation* gives it a much-needed jumpstart. ■ LI C. KUO

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 78% GOOD

VITAL STATS
DEVELOPER City Interactive PUBLISHER Merscom REQUIRED PIII 700MHz, 256MB RAM, 400MB HD, 32MB 3D card
WE RECOMMEND P4 1.6GHz, 64MB 3D card MAXIMUM PLAYERS 1 ESRB RATING T

SPACE INTERCEPTOR: PROJECT FREEDOM

In space, the vacuum doesn't suck — it blows

Somehow, we all knew that the final frontier would always foster war. Space battles are as inevitable as death and taxes, and *Space Interceptor* gives us the whole 360-degrees-of-freedom advantage that offers so much nauseating fun. It also simplifies the conquest of the cosmos with no-hassle controls and pretty graphics.

With all of Earth's natural resources used up, corporations wage war for control of the solar system's other resources — namely, the moon and planets we all learned about in basic astronomy. The developers boast that the game's solar system is accurately re-created from scientific data, so when you're in a dogfight against pirates above one of Jupiter's moons, you've got someone's assurance that the spatial detail is about right. But since most of us gamers have never left our apartments, let alone Earth's atmosphere, we're just gonna have to take their word for it.

Homing missiles are your best friend. They don't take long to lock and are remarkably accurate.

Flying your ship is incredibly simple: you use a mouse-and-keyboard setup along the lines of a first-person shooter. It's both functional and intuitive — though I had to do some heavy tweaking with the mouse sensitivity, as the settings never felt responsive enough for me to be a space ace. I also couldn't find a way to fully stop my ship, which left me drifting forward during scripted scenes where I wanted to stay put.

Most of the 21 missions revolve around attacking colonies or defending corporate transports against pirates, which facilitates a good mix of ground and aerial battles. Most of the time you'll be resorting to homing missiles to destroy your targets, as your main blaster is terribly weak.

Space Interceptor is a fun diversion if you want mindless space action. But I guarantee you'll have a better time with a bargain-bin copy of *FreeSpace 2* or *Freelancer*. ■ NORMAN CHAN

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 65% ABOVE AVERAGE

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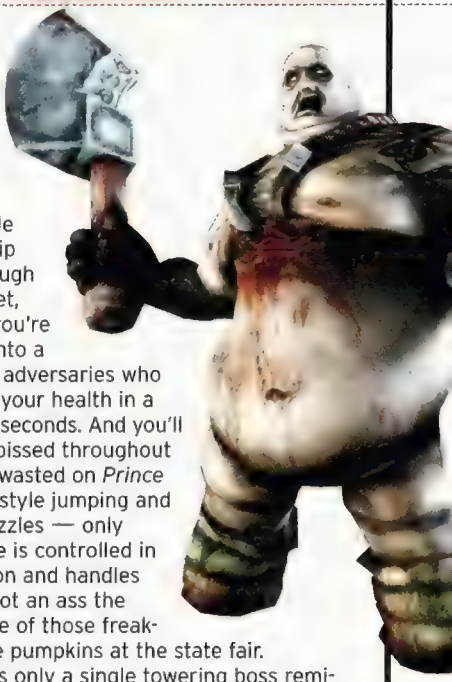
VITAL STATS
DEVELOPER People Can Fly PUBLISHER DreamCatcher REQUIRED PIII 1.5GHz, 384MB RAM, 1.2GB HD, 64MB 3D card, *Painkiller* WE RECOMMEND P4 2.4GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card MAXIMUM PLAYERS 16 ESRB RATING M

PAINKILLER: BATTLE OUT OF HELL

Expansion Pack? "Contraction Pack" is more like it...



It's hard to believe that the same team that constructed the elaborate, bed-wetting nightmares of last year's *Painkiller* is responsible for this disaster. Despite a beefy visual upgrade, this insultingly short add-on plays like a skanky collection of deleted scenes from the original game.

Daniel Warner's continuing campaign against Very Bad Things in Hell begins with promise — what other game would dare to kick off with a bloody confrontation against shrieking demonic children inside an *orphanage*? But after the brief introductory levels, *BooH* loses all resemblance to its progenitor. *Painkiller* wasn't exactly praised for its AI, but at least weaker enemies would cluster around stronger foes or spread out to make the most of their numbers. Not in *BooH*, where at one point it's possible to stand in a doorway and simply rev up the eponymous whirling Painkiller, watching opponents march right into the blades while you take minimal damage. Exasperation sets in later in the game when you realize that hellions you've already defeated return, and are now inexplicably *indestructible* (even though their blood spurts suggest they're taking damage). You'll watch in frustration as valuable rockets clip right through your target, or when you're dumped into a cluster of adversaries who can drain your health in a matter of seconds. And you'll really be pissed throughout one level wasted on *Prince of Persia*-style jumping and timing puzzles — only *this* prince is controlled in first-person and handles like he's got an ass the size of one of those freakishly large pumpkins at the state fair.

How did the devs run out of ideas so quickly? After so many World War II titles, the Leningrad level feels like the dead from other games simply got up for another go-around.

There's only a single towering boss reminiscent of the four you fought in *Painkiller*. I got tired of fighting him after a half-hour, having repeatedly failed to even scratch the bastard, so I cowered in an alcove to take a breather. He spontaneously died a minute later. I don't know why. And at the moment, I'm too disappointed to care. ■ LOGAN DECKER

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 42% TOLERABLE

VITAL STATS
DEVELOPER Heavy Iron Studios PUBLISHER THQ REQUIRED PIII 800MHz, 256MB RAM, 660MB HD, 32MB 3D card
WE RECOMMEND P4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, dual-analog gamepad MAXIMUM PLAYERS 1 ESRB RATING T

THE INCREDIBLES

Another movie tie-in that looks great...until you start playing

The Pixar film is clever and hilarious, the musical score is riveting retro-spy coolness, and the videogame... well, two out of three ain't bad.

It sounds like a good idea: 18 levels of platform acrobatics letting you thwack bad guys and shake concrete as various members of the superhuman Incredibles family. Each mission is tailored to someone's power: thus, Mr. Incredible is the lumbering tank-buster, Mrs. Incredible twists and stretches like taffy, little Dash sprints through hostile landscapes against a countdown, and so on. A skeletal narrative links the game to the film, and a popping 3D engine brings the look of Pixar's masterpiece to your computer in glorious high-res visuals.

Alas, good looks never redeem crummy gameplay. *The Incredibles* suffers from the curse of idiosyncratic game mechanics. The developers apparently chose to compensate for the skimpy under-designed levels by making them "incredibly" unforgiving. The Dash scenarios, for example, are great fun in five-second chunks — the rest of the time you're smacking into random obstacles until you memorize a rigidly linear "path." Expect to play through mindless twitchy sequences like these over and over (and over) before finally stumbling forward to the sadistically finger-breaking boss battles.

The Omnidroid makes Pedro Martinez look like an amateur.

You can play using the keyboard, but forget it: *The Incredibles* demands a good gamepad with analog thumbsticks, though it still won't fix the screwy gameplay. Will it surprise anyone that the camera lurches like a drunken sailor? That missing any number of critical jumps sends you limping to the beginning of a stage? That the game's wisecracking characters will be howled down in anger as you load from checkpoints for the umpteenth time?

Ultimately, like so many franchise tie-ins, it's just criminally mediocre. ■ MATT PECKHAM

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 49% TOLERABLE

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VITAL STATS

DEVELOPER Golem Labs PUBLISHER DreamCatcher REQUIRED P4 1.4GHz, 256MB RAM, 2GB HD, 64MB DirectX 9.0c-capable 3D card WE RECOMMEND Just watch the news instead MAXIMUM PLAYERS 32 ESRB RATING T

SUPERPOWER 2

Ten times as kooky as *The Daily Show*

Want to test those theories about Mutually Assured Destruction? In the "strategic warfare" screen, the globe turns an ominous red, and you're handed the Big Red Button. Pick your enemy, click on the red button, and watch your nuclear arsenal fly. Grim!

At last, you can figure out what might happen if South Africa invaded neighboring Namibia. (Believe it or not, author Larry Bond wrote a whole novel about this very scenario.)

Rarely have games promised so much, raised my hopes so high, and delivered so very little as *Superpower* and *Superpower 2*. Here were games that purported to be global simulations of geopolitics, powered by accurate databases for all the world's economies and militaries, allowing you to step into the high executive of any nation on the face of the Earth.

What do you actually get? Well, accurate databases.

Superpower 2 is a prettier and somewhat less psychotic game than Golem Labs' original creation. I say "somewhat less psychotic" because *Superpower* was an utterly random miasma of nonsensical international events in which you did your very best to control your nation by moving sliders around and wondering if what you were doing was having any effect. For this sequel, the developers added built-in restraints to eliminate the most absurd events, but the world is still madness.

You play from a scrolling overview of the globe, clicking on countries to bring up political, economic, and military information on them. You can make treaties, arrange exchanges, purchase raw materials, and do all the assorted things that any mid-level diplomat might do if he did his job entirely via sliders. You can craft the military of your dreams by designing individual units, and, once you grow bored enough, it's a simple matter to invade any nation on the planet.

There, I just summed up the entire play experience for you. It's essentially a lot of pointless microadjustment of your economy, coupled with a mounting desperation to achieve something, *anything*, of interest. But even when you resort to reckless play — which you will, and quickly — you'll find that your people soon forgive repression, your economy springs back from any self-inflicted wound, and even unprovoked nuclear annihilation of a random country won't necessarily earn you much opprobrium.

War itself is a mindless cartoon followed by laughable repercussions. After you click units over to the lucky target of your aggression, you wage war from an "RTS-very-lite" window that I defy anyone to make sense of. Victory is based entirely on overwhelming numerical superiority. Most times, invasion invites ruin at the hands of a peeved international coalition straight out of *The Simpsons* — your war against Iran may provoke an armed counterattack by Belgium, Japan, Cameroon, and Chilé. *¡No me gusta!*

Multiplay allows you to drop into a globe with other players, but this may just be the most pointless multiplayer game of all time, since there's naught to do but twiddle your sliders as usual and wait for someone to lob nukes at you. I got the same sense in multiplay that I got from the single-player mode — with narrower scope and more direction, there could be a compelling game in here somewhere.

The tutorial scenarios, which task you with specific and plausible achievements, point the way toward a *Superpower 3* that might actually be lifelike, limited in scope, and fun. But the sandbox play that makes up the bulk of *Superpower 2* is alternately tedium and lunacy. ■ DAN MORRIS

Design the destroyer of your dreams in the hands-on unit-builder screen. Once you've tweaked the blueprint to your liking, click Build and wait most of a year for your shipyards to produce the thing.

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT

HIGHS Impressive database of global militaries and economies; attractive world graphics.

LOWS No focus, no direction, no feeling of being in control; outrageous international responses.

BOTTOM LINE Tons of raw data, but not much constructive gameplay. It's lots of numbers.

43%

TOLERABLE

OTHER OPTIONS: GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS **82%**...TROPICO **77%**...TOM CLANCY'S RUTHLESS.COM **85%**

VITAL STATS

DEV Inverse Entertainment/10tacle Studios PUB Merscom REQUIRED PIII 500MHz, 128MB RAM, 250MB HD, 32MB 3D card
WE RECOMMEND PIII 1.2GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB 3D card, joystick or wheel MAX. PLAYERS 6 ESRB RATING Not rated

MICHAEL SCHUMACHER KART CHALLENGE 2005

Schumi hits an oil slick in this shaky new kart racer

After winning a world title, these guys step off the track to enjoy complimentary mini-golf.

You think it'd be easy for seven-time World Driving Champion Michael Schumacher to hook himself up — Tiger-style — with a decent PC or videogame racing franchise. But if *Michael Schumacher Kart Challenge 2005* is anything to go by, the Formula One champ needs a new agent.

Developed by Hamburg-based Inverse Entertainment, *Kart Challenge* is a value-priced sequel to *Michael Schumacher Racing World Kart 2002* (*PCG* rating: 46%), and like its forebear, it categorically fails to communicate any of the high-speed dynamics of organized sprint kart racing — the grassroots racing division that launched Schumacher's career.

Three kart classes are featured — "Fun," ISA, and FSA — but the latter pair can be unlocked only with near-perfect career-mode results. I'm usually pretty good at this stuff, but I had to revisit the same five ISA events *several dozen times* before I broke into the top tier. (I had little choice, but that sort of repetition will exceed the tolerance level of most gamers.)

The problems are myriad. First, the physics are a joke, even for an arcade racer — driving these machines is about as exciting as pushing heavy wooden blocks around a cement floor. The robotic AI drivers remain blithely oblivious to any nearby competitors, and when not playing bumper-cars in a tight cluster, they'll string together error-free laps that are hard to match (the difficulty level is fixed). The un-tweakable 100cc karts are lethargic and, in the case of the lower two classes, all but spin-proof, while the game's eight fenced-in tracks are a blend of unrealistically Byzantine indoor and outdoor layouts that inhibit overtaking.

The clipping-heavy graphics and "barely there" six-player internet game (the servers are perpetually empty) ultimately turn this into one of the most unfulfilling kart-racing experiences ever. I wonder if Schumi even played it before cashing the endorsement check. ■ ANDY MAHOOD

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 28% DON'T BOTHER

VITAL STATS

DEVELOPER Primal Software PUBLISHER Strategy First REQUIRED PIII 600MHz, 128MB RAM, 1.0GB HD, 16MB 3D card
WE RECOMMEND P4 1.8GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card MAXIMUM PLAYERS 1 ESRB RATING M

I OF THE DRAGON

The tale of a man and his will to survive this crappy RPG

Something must have been lost in the translation. While Russian developer Primal Software presumably thinks that it's got a nifty play on words with *I of the Dragon*, to my North American ears the title is the most groan-inducing pun to ever grace the box cover of a game.

Gameplay in this action-RPG is as grating as its nomenclature. Problems begin with the Fantasy 101 plot. Scharborr is devastating the land of Nimoan, and according to prophecy, only you can save the day, or stop forest fires, or something...sorry, I've endured this story so many times that I zone out at "prophecy."

This threadbare tale does, however, lead to the game's selling point — you play as a dragon. All the usual fantasy derring-do and dungeon-crawling has been swapped for breathing fire, ice, and acid, and winging from one monster lair to another.

But having you be a dragon instead of a Conan clone doesn't help matters, because the game design rips off the worst aspects of *Diablo*. Quests deal solely with right-click slaughter — mass murder by dragon-breath has never been so monotonous.

angles like this aren't helpful if you want to keep your scaly pal alive.

Some "excitement" comes from the spin-happy camera, though, as it practically induces motion sickness during battles. Constant circling is necessary to survive attacks on ground targets, and after a while I was just dizzy.

Character development is also blah. Aside from choosing a red, black, or blue dragon at the beginning of play and distributing points among skill categories after leveling up, there isn't any roleplaying to be had. The only points of interest are the rudimentary town-building and the magic system, in which red dragons specialize in fire incantations; black dragons in necromancy and acid; and blue dragons in ice and lightning (just like in *D&D*!).

Turn, turn, turn, vomit, turn, turn, turn.

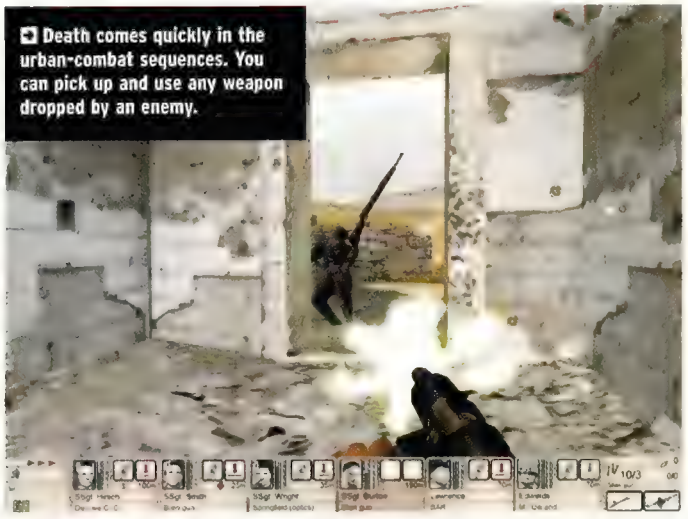
Need I say more? Primal had good intentions of duplicating *Diablo* with dragons in the leading roles, but you know what the road to hell is paved with. ■ BRETT TODD

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 31% DON'T BOTHER

VITAL STATS
DEVELOPER Illusion Softworks PUBLISHER Global Star Software REQUIRED PIII 1GHz, 128MB RAM, 3.5GB HD, 32MB VRAM WE RECOMMEND The required specs will do just fine MAXIMUM PLAYERS 32 ESRB RATING M

HIDDEN & DANGEROUS 2: SABRE SQUADRON

A no-brainer if ever there was one



Death comes quickly in the urban-combat sequences. You can pick up and use any weapon dropped by an enemy.

Hidden & Dangerous 2 was an otherwise excellent tactical shooter that suffered from clunky controls and bewildered AI — just like its predecessor. Its repetition of many of the original *H&D*'s faults left me to believe the developers weren't listening to customer suggestions. That said, it's hard to find a game that offered as much value, or "bang for the buck," as *H&D 2* did for tactical-shooter fans.

Now the first add-on for *H&D 2* is out, and *Sabre Squadron* continues all of these trends, serving up one of the best values you'll ever find in a $10 add-on.

You get nine new single-player missions set in various World War II hotspots around the globe, including Brest, Germany; North Africa; and Sicily. You'll lead a team of commandos through these scenarios, which are always covert, very dangerous, and typically involve rescuing POWs or blowing up stuff — ammo dumps, submarine pens, or secret military hardware.

Unfortunately, *H&D 2*'s AI is only marginally improved: Your squaddies still react slowly to enemy fire, and do stupid things (like stand up in front of an enemy machinegun the instant you're not controlling their actions). And while adversaries will run for cover and put up a good fight overall, you can still snipe one while his buddy — standing only a few feet away, mind you — fails to notice.

For many fans, however, the new co-op mode alone may be worth the 10 smackers.

Having to destroy an advancing Tiger tank with a single anti-tank round is just one of your challenges.

You can play through the nine missions with up to three friends, and you get another eight new multiplayer-only maps for up to 32 players. (Finding a populated game to join online can be a bit tough, though.)

If you're any kind of *H&D* fan, *Sabre Squadron* is a must-own — despite its flaws. If you're not, it represents another great reason to check out the series. ■ STEVE KLETT

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 78% GOOD

VITAL STATS
DEVELOPER Kheops Studio PUBLISHER The Adventure Company REQUIRED PIII 600MHz, 64MB RAM, 1GB HD, 32MB 3D card WE RECOMMEND P4 2.0GHz, 128MB RAM, 128MB 3D card MAXIMUM PLAYERS 1 ESRB RATING T

RETURN TO MYSTERIOUS ISLAND

Return? Did we ever go in the first place?

Based on Jules Verne's classic novel, *Return to Mysterious Island* is a point-and-click adventure game casting you as Mina, a young sailor stranded on a small island. Not only does she have to stay alive and find a way off the isle, but she also has to locate the body of Captain Nemo in the Granite House, and give him a proper burial to free his soul.

Wildlife on Mysterious Island includes the reclusive "cursor." Don't scare it, or it'll fly away.

Combinative puzzles are at the heart of this quest. For example, one of the challenges involves gaining enough strength to move heavy wooden logs that are blocking entrance to the woods. Strength is built by eating, so our resourceful protagonist must find a way to puncture a hole in bird eggs to drink the yolk without cracking the shell. She must also craft a fishing pole to snare some dinner, and build a fire in which to cook it.

You'll be doing plenty of object-combining in your inventory to produce new objects. Available inventory slots fill up fast, and not all items are required, so you need to think hard about what's necessary. Alas, finding strewn objects may require some careful pixel-hunting, or you'll miss them.

You play from a first-person perspective and can look around in 360 degrees (à la *Myst IV: Revelation*), but you move only one step at a time. Though the hand-drawn cut-scenes look amateurish, they don't detract much from the game.

Return to Mysterious Island features some challenging and logical puzzles and an entertaining story. It's a tad short, but it's a decent $20 pick nonetheless. ■ MARC SALTZMAN

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 74% GOOD

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VITAL STATS
DEVELOPER Beenox Studios PUBLISHER Aspyr Media REQUIRED PIII 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 1.4GB HD, 32MB 3D card
WE RECOMMEND P4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card, joystick or gamepad MAXIMUM PLAYERS 8 ESRB RATING E

MTX: MOTOTRAX

Tony Hawk goes on two wheels for a dirt-bike extravaganza

Professional motocross racing blurs the line between traditional and extreme motorsports. So, too, does Aspyr's *MTX: Mototrax*, an entertaining if bumpy foray into the bone-jarring world of dirt bikes, holeshots, and whoop-dee-doos.

Developed by Quebec-based Beenox Studios (who also gave us *Tony Hawk's Underground 2*), *MTX: Mototrax* is a value-priced console port of a PS2 and Xbox title released in early 2004. Two-wheeled racing sims are a rarity these days — with dirt-bike games even more infrequent — so it's a refreshing kick in the glutes to see a new PC treatment of this high-energy sport. Players can crack the throttle and churn up dust at two dozen varied motocross circuits, stadium supercross tracks, freestyle arenas, and "free ride" locales that feature impressive visual detail from starting gate to finish line. The individual rider animations are fluid, the lighting and particle effects are stellar, and the game's digitized dirt is about as convincing as packed sod's ever gonna get.

Gameplay depth is similarly impressive. Supplementing the expected single-race and ghost options is a lengthy and diverse career mode, complete with licensed bike upgrades, prize money, sponsorship, and even a PDA screen to keep track of your emailed contract offers. (Your booty can be used only to buy sponsor-identified biker apparel, however, which takes *all* the joy out of the monetary process.) Eight conventional multi-race championships make up the motocross and supercross segments, while the freestyle mode stresses *Tony Hawk*-style aerial stunts and the off-road "free ride" component dispenses a string of unique, point-earning challenges.

You also get a two-player split-screen game; an eight-player GameSpy, peer-to-peer, or LAN-powered multiplayer option; and a comprehensive and intuitive supercross track editor. Finally — and perhaps to compensate for the surprisingly MIA replay screen — Beenox also shoehorned in a healthy collection of bonus motocross videos that you're able to unlock as you go.

Performing Mat Hoffman-style aerial stunts for points is a huge part of the game. BELOW: Executing a perfect "holeshot" out of the starting gate requires the clutch button and fast reflexes.

Winning individual moto- and supercross championships in career mode is critical to unlocking tracks, bikes, and riders. It also lands the babes.

The wheels start coming off with the bike physics. Though the jumping dynamics are convincingly grounded (and sans the comically lengthy hang-times of *Motocross Madness 2*), *MTX*'s rubber-to-dirt interaction is pure arcade fluff, complete with super-stick tires and all-but-untippable bikes. The absence of any damage modeling or mechanical tweaking options further reinforces the game's console origins, as does the hair-trigger digital throttle and brakes. In fact, advanced force-feedback controllers are wasted here because the core MTX experience is essentially a button-mashing free-for-all that just doesn't pay off for analog stick-equipped PC racers. Preloading your bike's springs to "pop" over jumps or stabbing at the clutch button to rocket out of corners takes some skill, but paradoxically, I could also negotiate every track without ever touching the brakes.

Even with its dodgy physics and built-in potholes, *MTX* is entertaining. It's quite gratifying to fend off the increasingly aggressive AI riders at the circuit events, and fans of the *Tony Hawk* games can easily lose themselves for hours in the freestyle stunt challenges. Some stability issues notwithstanding (I experienced a number of crashes and lock-ups until I backpedaled my video drivers), *MTX: Mototrax* gives PC bike-racing fans a welcome and all-too-rare outlet for some mindless two-wheeled hijinks.

■ ANDY MAHOOD

PC GAMER | FINAL VERDICT

HIGHS Varied gameplay depth; richly detailed tracks and riders; track editor; value-priced

LOWS Digital gamepad physics; poor PC-controller support; no replay screen; assorted bugs.

BOTTOM LINE An entertaining, albeit flawed, successor to *Motocross Madness*.

75%

GOOD

OTHER OPTIONS: MOTOGP 2 **88%**...MOTOCROSS MADNESS 2 **87%**...MOTOCROSS MADNESS **92%**

VITAL STATS

DEVELOPER SSG **PUBLISHER** Matrix Games **REQUIRED** PIII 600MHz, 64MB RAM, 400MB HD
WE RECOMMEND The required specs will do just fine **MAXIMUM PLAYERS** 2 **ESRB RATING** Not rated

BATTLES IN NORMANDY

Lead the Allies or the Axis to *Decisive* victory

Strategic Studies Group has been building wargames almost as long as Silicon Valley has been building computers. Their *Carriers at War* and *Panzer Battles* are some of the best games ever made, in any genre. In 2003, SSG amazed us once again with the release of *Korsun Pocket*, a slick, detailed depiction of combat in the Second World War that begged for a West Front follow-up. Now the begging can cease, because that follow-up is here.

Decisive Battles of World War II: Battles in Normandy simulates the fight to wrest control of Normandy from Der Germans following the Allied invasion on D-Day. Playing as either the Allied or the German army, you maneuver battalions, regiments, and brigades in a somewhat freestyle game — freestyle because you can do what you want, when you want: You're not constrained narrowly by phases. For example, you can move several American armored infantry battalions, watch their attack on the Panzer regiment they're adjacent to, and then hop across the map to move your forces in a different sector. It feels intuitive and natural.

The 101st Airborne, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment: the Band of Brothers.

You can play out the entire invasion of Normandy in a cool (but time-consuming) scenario.

Unfortunately, the same can't be said of the interface. Once you select a unit, you must either de-select it with a keystroke before selecting another unit, or Ctrl-click the new unit. There aren't any mouse-over tool-tips, and the combat routine — though understandable once grasped — is initially daunting. All of these problems are exacerbated by the lack of a printed manual.

But *Battles in Normandy* is one hell of a wargame despite these annoyances. From the sands of Omaha Beach to the breakout from Normandy, the game's two campaigns and eight scenarios cover the conflict's significant battles with brain-twisting realism and heart-pumping excitement. It's a must-have for any West Front aficionado. ■ MARK H. WALKER

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 81% EXCELLENT

VITAL STATS

DEVELOPER Koios Works **PUBLISHER** Matrix Games **REQUIRED** PIII 550MHz, 128MB RAM (256MB for Windows XP), 400MB HD, 64MB 3D card **WE RECOMMEND** 256MB RAM **MAXIMUM PLAYERS** 2 **ESRB RATING** Not rated

TIN SOLDIERS: ALEXANDER THE GREAT

The "other" Alexander game lets you conquer the world, *Combat Mission*-style

Every once in a while a game will creep up, tap me on the shoulder, and remind me why I love gaming. A game that jerks me out of my take-out-the-garbage-and-the-trash, work-a-day world and throws me onto a distant battlefield. *Tin Soldiers* is such a game.

Simple yet charming, *Tin Soldiers* is turn-based, simultaneous-execution heaven, based on the battles of Angelina Jolie's legendary son. The units — which look like intricately detailed, professionally painted miniatures — represent phalanxes and regiments of cavalry, swordsmen, spearmen, archers, slingers, and the obligatory elephants.

The swordsmen, ponies, and elephants move through turns that separate into three phases: Command, Reaction, and Reserve. A tap of the keyboard and a click of the mouse orders the men to attack, defend, shoot their arrows, charge, or whatever. The catch is, no orders are executed until all of them are given. So those spearmen that you ordered Alexander's cavalry to outflank may turn to face the oncoming charge, or Alexander may be counter-charged by a previously unseen unit. The simultaneous turn-based resolution system feels much like that in the *Combat Mission* series.

Fighting on foot. The visuals aren't *Half-Life 2*-level, but they have a quaint feel all their own.

The battles punctuate a campaign that follows Alexander's conquest of the known world. Cut-scenes — low-budget but effective — move the story, and between battles you'll spend precious resources to refit your army and buy strategy cards such as Berserk (melee bonus) and Health. This preparation enhances the tension of the skirmishes to come.

Tin Soldiers is a treasure of a wargame. It aptly portrays his fight to conquer the world, and it works hard to transport you to the scene of its battles. ■ MARK H. WALKER

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 89% EXCELLENT

VITAL STATS

DEV/PUB Sony Online Ent. REQUIRED PIII 1.0GHz, 512MB RAM, 7GB HD, 64MB 3D card (pixel-/vertex-shader-capable), internet connection
WE RECOMMEND P4 2.0GHz, 1GB RAM, 128MB 3D card, broadband MAX. PLAYERS Massively multiplayer ESRB RATING T

Dopisi
Group
You get better at Disruption! (62)
Dopisi
YOUR Righteous Anger hits a ruins skulker for 27 points of divine damage.
A damage spell is cast on A ruins skulker.
You get better at Disruption (62).
Saving screenshot
The interface clearly tells you which social creatures are grouped with your target. No friendly-fire concerns here.

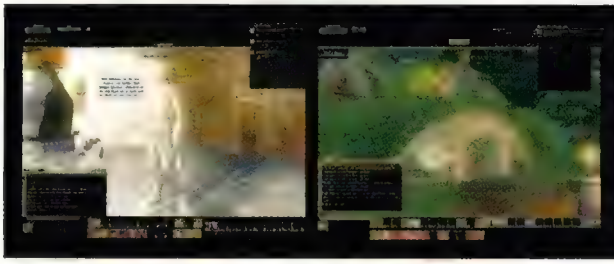
EVERQUEST II

The MMO King is back. But is it better? We brought in the RPG King to find out...

The original *EverQuest* is one of the most influential and popular computer games ever. It ruthlessly supplanted the handful of MMORPGs that preceded its release and established the definitive mold for the genre. Most of the genre's design conventions, and even its vocabulary, originated with *EverQuest*. So it's not surprising that *EverQuest II* rigidly sticks with the formula established by its precursor, offering only incremental improvements.

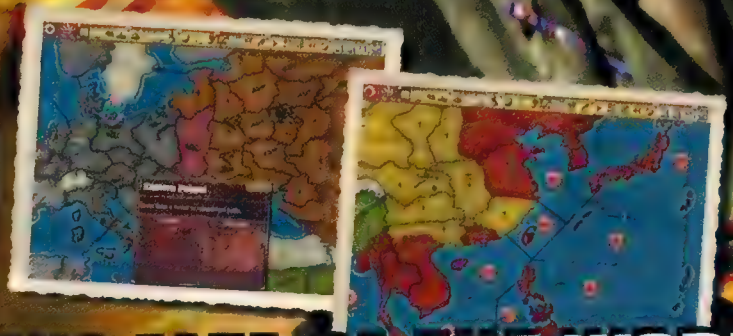
EverQuest II is set years after *EverQuest*, following cataclysmic events that shattered the landscape and left standing only the key cities of Freeport and Qeynos. Like *EverQuest*, this sequel sticks with very iconic fantasy trappings, and feels almost like a freestyle version of *Dungeons & Dragons*. There's a new race of villainous ratmen in addition to all of *EverQuest*'s (and its add-ons') gamut of character options, so you've got a great deal of choice when creating a character, especially since class race restrictions have been removed.

Evil characters are based in Freeport, while good characters nest in Qeynos, and both cities are spread over several game zones that are well-populated with quest-giving non-player characters. Gameplay still essentially consists of exploration, completing basic quests, and killing tons of monsters to gain experience levels and garner better loot. The original game primarily emphasized fighting against monsters instead of battling other players, and *EverQuest II* offers no player-vs.-player combat whatsoever. Some major quests in *EverQuest II* create instanced zones that spawn just for your group, but most adven-



FAR LEFT: More heroic rat-, snake-, and beetle-slaying — this knight-lieutenant sends you off to kill 10 of each. LEFT: Where have I seen these "Halfling" holes before? The game's art design is a bit bland and uninspired. At least "Merchant Dondl Fuzzlecutter" there has a nifty name.

Gary Grigsby's WORLD AT WAR™



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02.05
GENRE: ONLINE RPG
Captain Elgroudeth's Dilemma
Be sure to protect your weakest link, as you'll share in any party-member death penalties. Penalties are less harsh than in EverQuest, at least.
Your inventory is overflowing!

tions, since most have recorded voiceovers, which is unprecedented given the game's scope. (Although the voice-acting is mostly dreadful, so I'm not sure it's an improvement on reading.)

EverQuest II deserves kudos for both having a relatively clean launch and for actually shipping with a full slate of content, unlike many MMORPGs. Right from the outset, there's player housing, mounts, high-level content, and hundreds of available quests. But despite its refinements, the gameplay still feels like more of a repetitive grind than it does in better online RPGs. The first *EverQuest* has been frequently caricatured for requiring players to spend a great deal of time battling mundane beasties, yet *EverQuest II* once again requires you to spend an inordinate amount of time dispatching rats, bats, snakes, and beetles. There are numerous timesinks that artificially slow advancement, including the constant requirement to trek great distances to return to quest-givers. Other recent MMORPGs have shown that it doesn't have to be this way.

It's also less accessible and player-friendly than it should be. You're forced to pay housing rent based upon *real* time passed — which needlessly penalizes casual players. And all group members receive an XP penalty when a member dies. This punishment is intended to encourage stronger characters to protect more vulnerable ones, but what it actually does is discourage grouping with unknown players. It's still difficult to solo quests of your level, although the heroic-opportunity system helps, and you don't get any experience points if you fight an enemy group but fail to kill them all. The graphics are impressive, but the art design is generally bland and uninspired.

It's still a solid game that does everything at least mostly right, but almost everything seems a little duller and more tedious than you'd expect from a next-generation MMORPG. It may be a better game than its predecessor, but it doesn't do enough to truly distinguish itself from the recent competitors that have reimagined the possibilities of the genre *EverQuest* made huge. ■ DESSLOCK

turing occurs in public areas wherein other players may be hunting the same creatures or camping for respawning boss monsters.

While *EverQuest II* largely sticks to the design of its predecessor, it does refine some basic mechanics. Instead of your having to wander around to locate specific NPCs, local guards can now generate waypoints to direct you straight to your objective. Targeting a monster now instantly reveals whether it will attack without provocation, and also highlights any companion creatures that will be drawn into battle. Characters can't lose experience levels or items by dying, but they still have an incentive to return to their corpse site to mitigate their death penalty.

Though the best loot is still obtained by completing quests and killing creatures, there's a deep crafting system that allows you to build a huge variety of items. In combat you can now chain together special attacks — either by yourself or by teaming with other group members — to create formidable "heroic opportunities" that do special damage. Once you're in battle, enemies become locked to your group unless you call for assistance, so other players can't steal kills or be involuntarily dragged into the fight.

EverQuest II's system requirements are high (1GB of RAM is almost mandatory), particularly when impressive environmental shadows are enabled, but the game looks fabulous. NPCs appear a bit rubbery, but are highly detailed. And there are some great little touches that make the urban settings feel alive: NPC pets all have names, and cats will chase rodents they happen to run across. Characters will automatically look directly at your character's face when speaking, even if you're doing something goofy like jumping around. There's also a diverse assortment of quality musical tracks and excellent sound effects, plus Christopher Lee and Heather Graham provide some celebrity voice-acting.

You're not forced to read through voluminous NPC conversa-

PC GAMER | FINAL VERDICT

HIGHS Terrific graphics; loads of content; impressive music and sound effects; few bugs.

LOWS Retreads all of the familiar ground, catering more to hardcore players than to casual gamers.

BOTTOM LINE A solid game that improves upon its forebear, but that's about it.

78%

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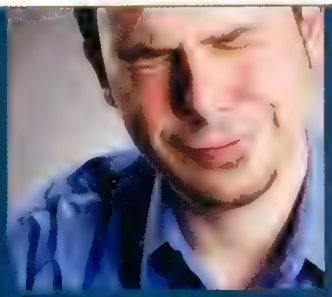

REACH BACK LIKE A PIMP AND SMACK THE VEDE

After years of careful observation, I've determined that there are exactly 17 different types of PC-gaming nerds. The first 10 aren't so bad: they include your typical MMO spazzoids and Uber-elite Falcon Northwest dandies. Types 11 through 15 are much worse, and include Gary Whitta (who is a type by himself). Numbers 16 and 17 are the nerdiest of the nerdiest, the dateless-est of the dateless, the...you get the idea. And though I've determined that there are only 17 different types of PC-gaming nerds, it turns out that I'm the super-secret 19th type.

Since the scale goes only to 17, you're undoubtedly asking yourself how that's possible. It's easier than you might imagine. *[Especially since Vede is pulling this all out of his (expletive deleted) — Ed.]* You see, besides being an MMO spazzoid *and* an Uber-elite Falcon Northwest dandy, I'm also an HDTV-loving slushy butt who's planning to buy a colossal HDTV so that I can sit my fat, slushy rump on my couch and play *Half-Life 2* in all its 50-inch, widescreen glory.

Sure, I won't have any money left over for silly things like, you know, hot water in which to bathe, or dates with my soon-to-be-leaving-me-because-I'll-be-bankrupt girlfriend. But I'll have me a 50-inch HDTV and a copy of *Half-Life 2*, dammit. And that's all a super-secret 19th-type nerd like me needs.

Greg Vederman, Executive Editor

Hard Stuff Trinity

BUILDING A NEW PC CAN BE a thrilling experience, but picking the wrong parts by mistake can end the joyride in a hurry. Luckily, we're here to help you select the best parts for the job. The prices listed below (obtained almost entirely from *www.pricewatch.com*) are the lowest we could find as we went to press. (Note: Prices do not include shipping costs.)

RAZER DIAMONDBACK
REVIEWED ON PAGE 86

ENTRY-LEVEL System

roughly $750

CASE		**HARD DRIVE**		**SPEAKERS**	
300-watt ATX form factor	$50	60GB 7,200rpm	$50	Logitech Z-340 (2.1)	$39
PROCESSOR		**SOUND CARD**		**KEYBOARD**	
AMD Athlon XP 2400+	$57	Creative Labs SB Audigy 2 ZS	$84	Standard	$15
MOTHERBOARD		**MONITOR**		**USB MOUSE**	
Asus A7V600-x	$65	17-inch CRT	$130	Logitech or Microsoft	$30
MEMORY		**VIDEO CARD**			
256MB PC-2700 DDR	$22	ATI RADEON 9600 PRO 128MB	$82		
CD-ROM/DVD-ROM DRIVE		**JOYSTICK**			
Pioneer 16x DVD-ROM	$35	Saitek Cyborg evo	$40		
FLOPPY DRIVE		**GAMEPAD**			
Samsung 3.5-inch 1.44MB	$8	Logitech	$30		

total $737

MID-RANGE System

roughly $1,250

CASE		**HARD DRIVE**		**SPEAKERS**	
300-watt ATX form factor	$50	120GB 7,200rpm	$80	Klipsch ProMedia GMX A-2.1	$149
PROCESSOR		**SOUND CARD**		**KEYBOARD**	
Intel P4 3.GHz 800MHz FSB	$178	Creative Labs SB Audigy 2 ZS	$84	Standard	$15
MOTHERBOARD		**MONITOR**		**USB MOUSE**	
Asus P4P800	$90	19-inch CRT	$300	Logitech or Microsoft	$30
MEMORY		**VIDEO CARD**			
512MB PC-3200 DDR	$70	ATI RADEON 9600 XT 128MB	$150		
CD-ROM/DVD-ROM DRIVE		**JOYSTICK**			
Pioneer 16x DVD-ROM	$35	Saitek Cyborg evo	$40		
FLOPPY DRIVE		**GAMEPAD**			
Samsung 3.5-inch 1.44MB	$8	Logitech	$30		

total $1,309

DREAM System

roughly $3,000+

CASE		**FLOPPY DRIVE**		**GAMEPAD**	
480-watt ATX form factor	$100	Samsung 3.5-inch 1.44MB	$8	Logitech	$30
PROCESSOR		**HARD DRIVE**		**SPEAKERS**	
AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 (socket 939)	$840	250GB 7,200rpm	$200	Creative Labs GigaWorks 7.1	$499
MOTHERBOARD		**SOUND CARD**		**KEYBOARD**	
Asus A8V Deluxe	$160	Creative Labs SB Audigy 2 ZS Plat.	$160	Microsoft Natural Keyboard Pro	$40
MEMORY		**MONITOR**		**USB MOUSE**	
Twin sticks of 512MB PC-3200 DDR	$120	22-inch CRT	$570	Logitech MX 510	$80
DVD-ROM BURNER		**VIDEO CARD**			
Sony DRU-700 (dual-layer)	$230	ATI RADEON X800 XT Platinum Ed. or GeForce 6800 Ultra	$499		
CD-RW		**JOYSTICK**			
Plextor 52x32x52	$100	Thrustmaster HOTAS Cougar	$269		

total $3,905

*Hardware products vary in price and target audience: some are Entry-level, some are Mid-range, and some are Dream-class. Each item in Hard Stuff is labeled accordingly.

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- **15.4" WSXGA+ Active Matrix Display**
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  - **Intel® PRO/Wireless Network Connection 2200BG**
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- **512MB PC2700 (333MHz) DDR SDRAM**
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DREAM

Voodoo ENVY m:790

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

Hey jealousy, hey jealousy

Even I, the long-time Tech Commando here at Hard Stuff, don't have a PC this powerful. Should you buy one of these amazing, almost mythically powerful new laptops from VoodooPC, I'll cry like a little girl. I really will. I don't think that a reader, even a really loyal reader such as you, should have a faster computer than me. Obviously, I can't *be* the Tech Commando if *you're* faster.

Good thing for my fragile ego that at its $5,000 price, very few of you will be able to afford an ENVY m:790. Yup, the good stuff always costs. Under the hood of this enormous, expertly painted desktop replacement is more cutting-edge hardware than a gamer on the go could ever hope for. It's powered not only by a desktop-version 3.6GHz Pentium 4 processor, but also a new user-upgradeable PCI Express-based NVIDIA GeForce Go 6800 graphics card. Running with 256MB of RAM and a full 12 pixel pipes, the 3D card in this machine is comparable to the high-end desktop boards that NVIDIA has on shelves right now. Never before has there been this level of parity between desktop and mobile parts. It's really quite nerdlightful.

SYSTEM SPECS

SCREEN 17" TFT WSXGA+ 1680x1050 **WEIGHT** 12 lbs. **DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)** 15.7" x 12" x 2" **CPU** Intel P4 3.6GHz **MEMORY** 1GB 533MHz DDR2 **OPTICAL DRIVE** 8x Dual Layer DVD+/-RW **HARD DRIVES** Two 80GB 5,400rpm **VIDEO** GeForce Go 6800 256MB **WARRANTY** 1-year warranty, parts and labor **LAPTOP BAG** Yes

In addition to muscle, the ENVY is rich with cutting-edge functionality. While our review unit came with only a single 8x dual-layer DVD burner, the m:790 chassis is capable of housing two optical drives at a time, which, as many desktop PC users already know, is convenient as all such-and-such if you copy lots of CDs and DVDs.

Ordinarily, two optical drives wouldn't fit inside a laptop chassis. But to accommodate the heat generated by this machine's blisteringly fast CPU and GPU, the case had to be built larger than normal. If you've got the room on your lap, though, the ENVY will reward you with a heap of extra features.

For example, the unit's 17-inch, wide-aspect-ratio screen is one of the best I've ever seen on a notebook. Fast-paced games don't ghost when you move quickly, and never before have I observed such deep blacks on an LCD. (Black areas almost always look grey on LCDs.) Voodoo has even integrated a small webcam above the screen.

The ENVY is also the first notebook I've tested that has dual hard drives running in a RAID 0 array. This configuration "tricks" the PC into thinking that its two 80GB hard drives are one large 160GB drive, thus allowing the PC to access its "one" storage unit faster than it could a single drive.

Wi-Fi, Gigabit Ethernet, and a 56K modem are all included in this model, and the ENVY even has a surprisingly good sound system, capable of cranking out rock, rap, and action games with authority and clarity.

Our review unit was tall in everything but its shortcomings. Though the m:790 is intended to be a desktop replacement, some may find it to be too large and heavy to travel with. (See the system-specs box for details.) This unit also projects a lot of heat up through the keyboard onto your hands, but that's normal for gaming notebooks, as is this PC's less-than-an-hour battery life.

Performance-wise, the m:790 won't beat a comparably equipped desktop system, but it's definitely the fastest notebook I've ever tested — faster even than Dell's mighty XPS. And as you can glean from the benchmark numbers below, solid framerates even at 1280x1024 are the norm.

But as your Tech Commando, I *order* you not to buy an ENVY m:790. This machine is simply too good, too powerful. I just don't think you'll be able to handle it. Better leave it to me. Yup. Sorry. Them's the breaks.

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PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT — VOODOO ENVY M:790

HIGHS	Fastest notebook ever tested; dual hard drives; room for dual optical drives; brilliant LCD screen.
LOWS	Price; size; weight; battery life.
BOTTOM LINE	Voodoo's latest ENVY has *PC Gamer* green with...invidiousness? All we know is, we want one.

92%
EDITORS' CHOICE

BENCHMARKS	3DMark03[1]	3DMark05[1]	AquaMark3[2]	Doom 3[3]	Splinter Cell[4]	Halo[4]	Far Cry[5]
Voodoo ENVY m:790	3DMarks: 7,830 CPU: 783	3DMarks: 2,932 CPU: 3,836	Score: 48,599 GFX: 6,657 CPU: 9,003	1024x768: 70, 44 (fps) 1280x1024: 55, 30 (fps)	1024x768: 66 fps 1280x1024: 56 fps	1024x768: 74 fps 1280x1024: 51 fps	1024x768: 59, 52 (fps) 1280x1024: 56, 37 (fps)

1 Tests run at 1024x768 with trilinear filtering, no AA, Anisotropy set to "1" 2 Default test run at 1024x768
3 High Quality, followed by High Quality with 4x AA 4 All settings maxed
5 (v. 1.3) Very High settings, water set to Ultra High; no AA or AF, then 4x AA and 4x AF

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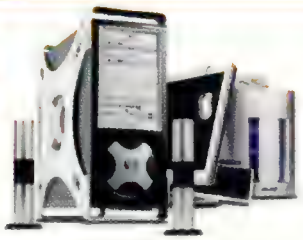

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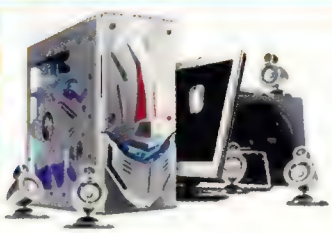

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Editors' Choice

Razer Diamondback

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

This tiny mouse has a huge bite

RAZER
Razer Diamondback
$60*
www.razerzone.com

Long before Microsoft and Logitech ever dreamt of creating gaming mice, Razer was on the scene, getting it done. Loved by the hardcore for their precision, loathed by casual gamers for their wonky ergonomics, Razer's ultra-high-precision Boomslang mice garnered a great deal of buzz when they first hit the scene. More importantly, they got people talking about how much of a difference a good mouse could make in improving your mad gaming skillz.

After years of absence, Razer re-released the Boomslang in 2004 to mixed reviews. The mice still weren't comfortable and were still ball-based rather than optical. But that's water under the bridge now that Razor has released the Diamondback. It's comfortable, it's optical, and at 1,600dpi, it's twice as precise as the incumbent whose ass it kicks, Logitech's awesome MX 510.

The Diamondback requires special drivers to achieve maximum resolution, so don't plug in the mouse without its included software and think you're getting full precision, 'cuz you ain't. With Razer's software installed, fast-moving fraggers have the option of dialing in ultra-responsive controls, while desktop users can quickly crank down the sensitivity to mere-mortal levels for standard work and play. However you set it, you'll never lose precision and you'll always know that you're using a mouse unlike any you've used before. It's just so damn smooth!

As with all of Razer's designs, the Diamondback can be used by either left- or right-handers, and both groups have access to the unit's full complement of buttons — three on the top (including scroll wheel) and two on each side. My only complaint is that because of the mouse's ambidextrous design, the side buttons aren't in the easiest-to-reach position for lefties *or* righties. That one quibble aside, the Diamondback is a suburb gaming instrument.

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 92%

Z-5500 Digital

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

Cute animals will die and neighbors will hate you

LOGITECH
Z-5500 Digital
$399*
www.logitech.com

PC speakers have gotten so good in the past several years that the best 5.1 sets can all-but-replace full home-stereo systems. It all started in the late '90s when Klipsch released the world's first-ever set of THX-certified PC speakers, the ProMedia 4.1s. That's when the whole industry woke up and got *damn* serious about rocking our world.

It's because of that audio revolution that Logitech can now bring us its best set of multimedia speakers to date, the THX-certified Z-5500 Digital, the successor to its aging but oh-so-wonderful Z-680 speakers.

The 500-watt Z-5500 improves on the Z-680 design in three key areas: (1) Bass response. This new unit's sub is *enormous* — the largest I've ever seen accompany a set of PC speakers. Inside, the new driver is a whopping 10 inches, up from the Z-680's 8 inches. Small woodland animals' heads *will* explode** if you crank this thing too loud. (2) Control pod. The new control pod is a dream compared to the Z-680's. The new pod is gorgeous, easy to read, and tracks much better when you're dialing-in volumes. (3) Hiss. Many Z-680 users complained of digital hiss coming from their satellites. That problem has been solved, so kiss the hiss goodbye.

Though much has changed, a lot has stayed the same. The Z-5500 satellites, while redesigned, sound exactly the same as the Z-680's. And that's a very good thing. Also, the Z-5500s can still pull double-duty as PC speakers *and* fully digital Xbox or PS2 speakers — all for far less money than it costs to upgrade a set of Klipsch or Creative Labs speakers to similar functionality.

One gripe: All of this unit's 25-foot speaker wires are hard-wired to its satellites, so if that's not long enough, you're boned. If it is long enough, however — and for most of you it will be — Logitech's new Z-5500 Digital speakers are a dream come true.

PC GAMER FINAL VERDICT 94%

* M.S.R.P. **Their heads won't actually explode.

$ 1559

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Extended PLAY

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02.05 MODS OF THE MONTH

Played a great mod? Email the address above!

BULLETTIME v. 1.1

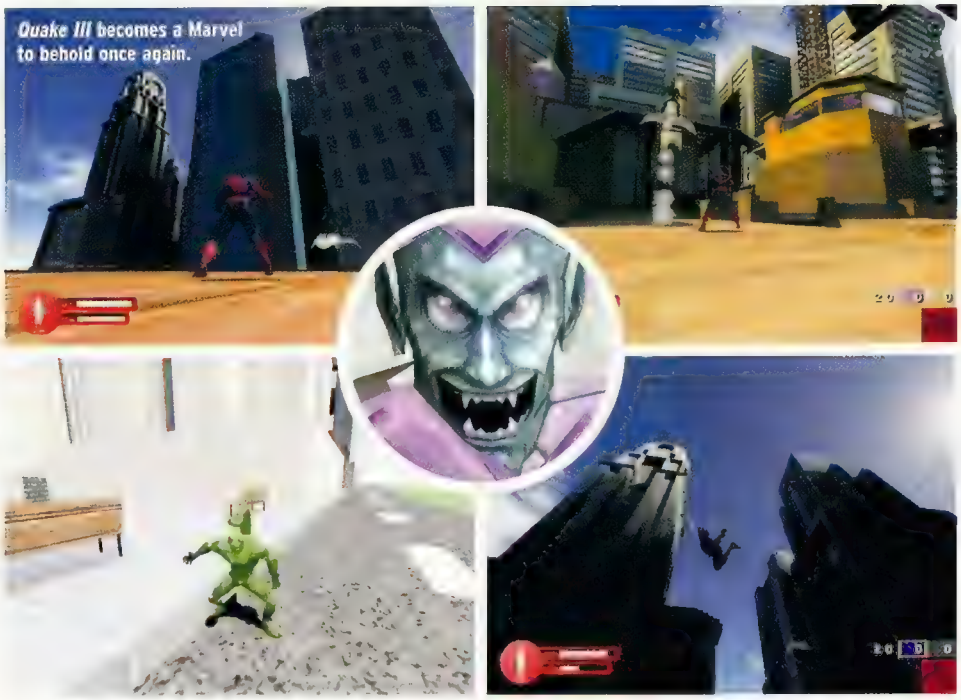
FOR: *Half-Life 2*
AUTHOR: Delerion
SITE: Halflife2.filefront.com

Beaten *Half-Life 2*, but can't get enough of the physics? Try this bullet-time mod, which lets you slow down time at the push of a button, allowing you to take in the physics goodness in all its glory. When bullet time is activated, the gravity gun is beefed up and can lift some heavier objects, plus enemies fly back much farther when you hit them. Try launching Combine troops using the revolver!

GRAVMOD v. 2.0

FOR: *Doom 3*
AUTHOR: BloodRaynesite
SITE: doom3.filefront.com

Why should *Half-Life 2* have all the fun? This mod adds a gravity gun to *Doom 3*, including a custom-built weapon model. *Doom 3* doesn't have as many moveable objects as *Half-Life 2*, but you can use this custom grav gun to pick up enemies and fling 'em around from minute one, something you can't do in *Half-Life 2* until the final level.



SPIDER-MAN: DYNAMIC FORCES

Making perfect Spidey sense

QUAKE III

LET'S FACE IT: WE'VE BEEN SHORT-CHANGED. The new Spidey movie had us crying out for a new Spidey game, only for Activision to roll out its painfully mediocre kid-version PC title and splatter our hopes all over the walls. Not for the first time, it's down to a mod team to resuscitate our dreams — molding the good old reliable *Quake III* engine into a slinging, swinging combat mod packed with cityscapes and villains.

At the core of *Dynamic Forces* is a versus mode — think deathmatch in multiplay, or single-play with bots. Here you can choose from among Spidey and a series of villains — Green Goblin, Venom, Carnage, and Scorpion — and throw yourself into custom maps that include Central Park and Brooklyn Bridge. They're all giant playpens for web slinging and combat carnage, and you'll find tons of Spidey details, right down to Scorpion's Acid Spray sprinkling deadly energy over the battlefield. As Spider-Man, you have the advantage of Spidey-Sense, which throbs whenever an enemy is in range — though Goblin can mute this ability using pumpkin bombs.

Supplementing this heady deathmatch brew are a couple of fresh game types such as a "Reporter Mode," in which one player assumes the role of alter-ego Peter Parker. Here you'll dart about the map photographing villains for points, while they try to end your photo spree; eventually, you'll swap places with the villainous player who claims your scalp. Meanwhile, "Jewel Heist" is a team-based mode in which one side attempts to snatch a bag of gems from a booby-trapped security building, while the other faction defends the haul.

A one-map alpha build appeared online last year (*http://dynamic5.gamespy.com/~smdf*), and at press time, a full-scale beta release is imminent. We're already tingling at the thought.

5 MY GAMES OF THE MONTH: 1. HALF-LIFE 2 2. VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE — BLOODLINES 3. NHL EASTSIDE HOCKEY MANAGER 4. SUPERPOWER 2 5. CITY OF HEROES

DEAD MAN WALKING: LEVELS TO LOVE

MAX PAYNE 2

In real time: the best custom-made maps for the *Max Payne 2* sub-game

DEAD MAN WALKING IS A FURIOUSLY FUN *MAX PAYNE 2* mode unlocked by completing the single-player story. The idea is simplicity itself: Blast your way through claustrophobic levels filled with entire armies of goons. The question is, How long can you last against the relentless onslaught? If you're having problems, remember your *Max Payne* essentials: the more killing you do, the more bullet time you get; and chug the readily available painkillers as needed. It's all against the clock, too, so we've set a few *PCG* par times for you to beat. (You can nab the following maps, plus a bunch more, from *www.levels4you.com/sections/maxpayne2*.)

When you hear the whine, spin and shoot! (*Breaking Daylights*)

CHATEAU_2

■ **BY** JCDenton999
■ **INSPIRED BY** *Matrix Reloaded*

This superb re-creation of the chateau fight in *The Matrix Reloaded* scores one major point over its opponents: the room is hugely destructible. Your shots will tear through banisters and pillars, knock over statues, and rip the precious artwork hanging on the walls. (Par Time: 4:36)

MURDER BURGER INC.

■ **BY** D-Silence
■ **INSPIRED BY** *Falling Down*

No, super-size *this*. In a frantic shootout set in a fast-food restaurant, you'll need to cobble together a temporary arsenal from the weapons carried by the serving staff and the crowd of irate, constantly respawning customers. *MBI* is filled with incidental physical details, like the way a grenade will blow out a whole staircase, trapping those on the top floor (making 'em perfect fodder for a second grenade). (Par Time: 3:01)

ADDRESS UNKNOWN

■ **BY** Clement "Corwin" Menendez
■ **INSPIRED BY** *Face/Off*

Miss the bizarrely beguiling fairground levels from *MP 2*? This mod should sate your taste for psychedelic strangeness. *AU* is a DMW shootout based around the hand-drawn, cardboard-cutout suburbs in the Fun House. As a plus, the figure-eight manner in which the rooms are connected means you've always got somewhere else to go: there are no dead-ends, no traps. (Par Time: 2:09)

PRISON

■ **BY** David "Thnatiq" Marquis
■ **INSPIRED BY** *The Rock*

This one's a riot. Literally. Set in a detention center, *Prison* is the finest DMW map we've played, superior even to the official efforts unlocked at the end of the game. You'll need three-dimensional awareness, as the goons spawn on all three levels of the tiered balconies. To stand a chance, head to the top floor and rain down lead from above, rather than get involved in the melee. Just watch out for the red, explosive barrels: if you're caught in the blast, you're toast. (Par Time: 2:08)

BREAKING DAYLIGHTS

■ **BY** Mikael Paunila
■ **INSPIRED BY** *Bad Boys 2*

There's nowhere to hide in this frost-bitten building site. The spawn points are everywhere, making *BD* one of the hardest DMW maps. Canny players will circle around the central pillar, collecting ammo from the steady stream of corpses. One useful note: the arrival of AI is preceded by a high-pitched whine — use this signal to decide where to shoot. (Par Time: 1:35)

WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR MODS

A handful of mods for Relic's *Warhammer 40,000* RTS are already on the way. Right now you can download an alpha version of *Epic Legions* (*http://epiclegions.warriorhut.net*), a mod inspired by the Warhammer Epic ruleset that rushes you straight into large-scale battles complete with Titan units. *Total War* (http://*totalwar.moddb.com*) is another mini-mod that promotes greater metal-grinding carnage: it triples the number of units available, and adds the Imperial Guard as a selectable faction. As for total conversions, look no further than *Starforge* (*www.starforge2004.de*), a project that's aiming to fuse *Dawn of War* with Blizzard's legendary sci-fi RTS game *StarCraft*.

DESSLOCK ALTERNATELIVES@PCGAMER.COM

Alternate Lives

DON'T FEAR THE MMOG

Hope abounds for solo roleplayers

IN 2004, SOLITARY ORC-HATERS DESPAIRED AS the RPG genre was dominated by massively multiplayer online games. Last year's deluge of online RPGs included *City of Heroes*, *World of Warcraft*, *EverQuest II*, *Lineage II*, *Saga of Ryzom*, *Horizons*, and add-ons for virtually every previously released MMOG that still existed. By comparison, traditional-RPG fans were relegated to questing with *Vampire: Bloodlines* (the only major release by an American publisher), *Sacred* and *Beyond Divinity* (European imports), and *Blades of Avernum* (Spiderweb's latest shareware epic). Not only were there more MMOs than conventional RPGs, but with the exception of *Bloodlines*, the online RPGs had larger budgets and more high-tech pizzazz as well.

RPG fans are increasingly being forced to pay monthly subscription fees and risk being subjected to inane doodzpeak chatroom banter just to get their roleplaying fix. We're doomed to camp static environments forever. Lord British won!

Hyperbole's always a gas, but the situation isn't all that bleak. MMOs are now much more capable of offering experiences comparable to the best single-player RPGs, while retaining their multiplayer strengths. The latest crop makes extensive use of "instanced" adventures, which allow you to participate in personalized and heavily scripted encounters. And several of these accommodate solo players — accomplished by minimizing real-world time-sinks and grouping requirements. Though the quests offered by early MMOs were extremely simplistic, this year's best offerings emphasized elaborate questing experiences.

These days, subscription fees are so lucrative that they're unlikely to be easily abandoned, but increased competition will cause more companies to consider alternative financial models such as the module system proposed by *Guild Wars*. This system forces you to pay fees beyond the retail price *only* if you want to play one of the new modules. And once you've paid for the one(s) you're interested in, you can play with that content forever without incurring additional fees.

While it's gratifying to see MMOs continue to improve, it's even more heartening to see conventional RPGs solidly rebounding. In various stages of development are *KOTOR II*, *Fallout 3*, *Gothic III*, and BioWare's *Dragon Age* and spiffy new Unreal Engine 3 game. Bring on their more involved plots, dynamic environments, NPC crafters, and precious saved-games. And in the meantime, let's hope that MMO designers continue to find inventive (and inexpensive) ways of sating our hunger for the single-player experience.

MY GAMES OF THE MONTH: 1. EVERQUEST II 2. WORLD OF WARCRAFT 3. HALF-LIFE 2 4. DOOM 3 5. CITY OF HEROES

The Wargamer

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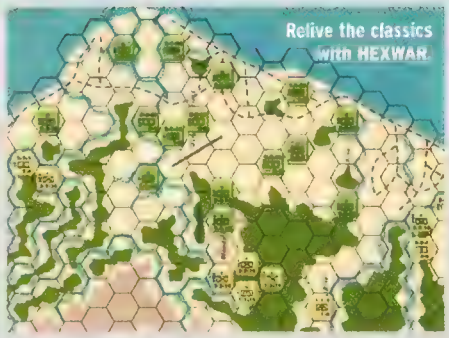

NOSTALGIA ALERT! BOARD-GAME GREATS GO ONLINE

SINCE ACCEPTING THIS GIG I've spent a lot of time spouting opinions, bashing the wargame industry, and offering solutions. But not today. Today I want to take a break, open the window, and let in a breath of fresh air — a refreshing breeze named HEXWAR (*www.hexwar.com*).

Most computer wargamers cut their gaming teeth on board games. In fact, many of us look back longingly on those early board-based wargaming days. Maybe it was the excitement of something new, or the simplicity of the designs. Or perhaps it's fond memories of a time when we didn't have taxes, mortgages, or cluttered garages to deal with. Whatever it is, HEXWAR takes you back to that time.

Programmed by Keith and Carola Martin-Smith, HEXWAR adapts original Strategic Publications Incorporated (SPI) board games for play over the internet. Decision Games, which now owns the rights to the SPI titles, has given its blessing to the project, and HEXWAR currently offers 10 games, including SPI classics *Bastogne*, *Napoleon at Waterloo*, and *Arnhem*.

Playing is simple. Drive your browser over to *www.hexwar.com*, download the Game Launcher and any games you'd like to play, and then sign up for a ridiculously cheap subscription ($12.95/month, or as low as $9.95/month if you pay for multiple months in advance). Now issue a challenge to your fellow wargamer. Once he's accepted, take your first move and send it along! The HEXWAR software handles everything else. Heck, it's *almost* as good as sitting across the kitchen table from your opponent, sipping suds and munching pretzels.

These are the types of wargames I've been extolling since I began this column. Are they easy to play? You bet: It takes about 10 minutes to learn the rules for most of these puppies. Challenging? Absolutely. After all, you're playing against your fellow human beings! Are they good-looking? Well, I hate to judge my fellow man, but the games sure look nice (in a retro kind of way). The maps are direct copies of the original games', and so are the counters.

Distinctly two-dimensional, distinctly old-school, HEXWAR evokes a feeling of nostalgia that's strong enough to turn my silver hair brown and make me slap an Iron Butterfly LP on the turntable. This is good gaming: simple, fun, and immersive. And that's not an opinion — it's a fact!

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Sim Column

Wings of Power's B-29 is ready to lay waste to Andy's virtual victim (once someone adds functional bombs to FS 2004).

CLEVELAND ROCKS

Forget Baghdad — let's bomb Ohio!

SOMETIMES YOU JUST WANT TO BLOW THE crap out of something.

Every now and again, and usually in reaction to late-breaking news, I get the urge to virtually unload on something. At those times, I go searching for the U.S. military's biggest, baddest piece of ordnance to deploy against a suitable target on my PC. I'm a pacifist in real life, so maybe there's an ideological conflict here, but this one-time sortie will be quick, cathartic, and, of course, only simulated.

So, what to bomb? Iraq? Afghanistan? Nah, we've already cratered both places into oblivion (and the bad guys just moved indoors). North Korea? Hmm, maybe. The Korean Peninsula is quite well-represented in *Falcon 4.0* SP4, so I could just load up an F-16 with a B61 tactical nuke and pay an explosive visit to Kim Jong-il's Pyongyang bunker. (*All* those bastards have bunkers.)

On second thought, no. The world's already a pretty scary place, so I probably shouldn't piss off a demented Axis of Evil leader by flattening his capital — even if only virtually. But what does that leave? Iran? Syria? No, wait. *Ohio!*

I should make it clear that I'm not a terrorist of any kind, and the Secret Service has no cause to come a-knockin' at my door. The Buckeye State is a more or less arbitrary target, though its 20 electoral votes won the election for Dubya last year, and even from my homestead in Canada, I *was* sort of rooting for the other guy. More to the point, I kind of just want to see what happens when I digitally drop a 10-ton MOAB (Massive Ordnance Air Burst) right smack in the middle of a bustling American city like, say, Cleveland.

There are no combat flight sims with Ohio scenery, however, so I might have to improvise a little using *Flight Simulator 2004*. The planes will be easy — Shockwave's superb *Wings of Power* add-on serves up an impressive fleet of World War II bombers — but what about the payload? Because *FS 2004* has no destructible scenery, and *Wings of Power* doesn't let you deploy bombs, those spectacular pyrotechnics I seek just aren't in the cards.

Okay, to hell with it. I guess I'll just drop a few "I ♥ Kerry" leaflets for now and hope that the Shockwave folks can develop some functional civilian-flight-sim weaponry in time for the Arnie-vs-Hillary rematch in 2008. (Note to Ohioans: I have an FSAA-enhanced, high-poly B-29 Superfortress all warmed-up and ready for takeoff. Don't make me use it.)

5 MY GAMES OF THE MONTH: 1. NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND 2 2. PACIFIC FIGHTERS 3. RICHARD BURNS RALLY 4. NASCAR RACING 2003 5. FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2004

Killing Box

CHUCK OSBORN KILLINGBOX@PCGAMER.COM

TUNING UP WITHOUT THE SNAKE OIL

BROWSING YOUR LOCAL software store is a lot like visiting a pharmacy. You'll find all sorts of utilities for curing an ailing PC — not just software that zaps viruses, but programs that claim to optimize arthritic old code and energize lethargic hard drives. And like miracle cream that's supposed to dissolve excess fat from your thighs, too many of these tools are akin to snake oil in a box.

One such package is Game On! from Fogware (*www.fog-ware.com*). It's really three different utilities wrapped into one: Speed Disc, a virtual-drive program that promises to "run games 100x faster from your hard drive"; Game PC Tuner, an optimizer that transforms your PC into a "dedicated game machine"; and Start Cheating, a program that allows you to cheat in games that don't have cheat codes.

This isn't a review, so I couldn't muster the courage to test Speed Disc or Start Cheating on my own PC. Besides, Speed Disc's claim of 100x speed-increases sounds dubious since most games can be fully installed to your hard drive anyway, and the only reason you need the CD in the drive is to satisfy a game's copy-protection scheme.

I did, however, turn my home and work machines into "dedicated game machines"...with surprising results. Game PC Tuner makes a series of tweaks to speed up your games, such as optimizing video-card performance, turning off unnecessary background programs, and tuning up your memory and hard-drive access time. Installation was quick and easy — and best of all, the utility said my PC would now run games 10 percent faster.

My P4 2GHz benefited the most: Its score in the *Counter-Strike: Source* stress test rocketed up from a miniscule 66.27 frames per second to a stratospheric high of 68.15 fps — nearly 2 frames faster, but still short of a 10-percent increase. My P4 3.2GHz didn't do so well: the before-and-after results in *CS: Source* were virtually identical. The shocker was in *Doom 3*, where the "after" score was a half-frame slower than the "before."

Here's the real deal, folks: To run at its best, all your PC needs is consistent care and common sense. Defrag your hard drive every month or so, keep your drivers up-to-date, minimize the number of programs running in the background, and once every year, reformat your hard drive and reinstall Windows. It's the exercise your game machine *really* needs to lose excess flab.

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HALF-LIFE 2

It takes more than a crowbar to make a hero. It takes guts, cunning, and intelligence. And sometimes, some help from the experts. Read on for Valve's very own tips for the year's best shooter! (WARNING: Spoilers!)

Never interrupt an enemy when he's killing another one of your enemies.

BETWEEN A ROCK AND THE COMBINE

Taking on an entire fascist regime would be tough for Rambo, and you're just a physicist! Luckily, we've got a few tips for some of the trickier parts of Gordon Freeman's new adventure.

ANTLION GUARD FIGHTS

There will be three instances where you'll have to face the meaner, bigger Antlion Guards, also known as Myrmidonts. The first fight is outdoors in the Sandtraps level. Be sure to take the fight toward the resistance barricade, where a resistance fighter is manning a mounted machine gun that can help you out. Because the area you're fighting in is a nice open space, you shouldn't have too much trouble avoiding the Antlion Guard's attacks while hitting it with your heaviest weapons (SMG grenades, RPG rounds, and Pulse Rifle bursts).

The trickier fights come later in the Nova Prospekt prison. Here you'll have a lot less room to maneuver, and using explosives can hurt you more than the Myrmidont. Your best bet is to use your gravity gun. Not only will you save ammo, but also the Myrmidonts are especially vulnerable to thrown objects. Toss explosive barrels at them from a distance, and when they're nearby, the sinks along the walls make great gravity-gun ammo. Radiators are also effective.

The next time you face a Myrmidont, it'll be fighting with a squad of Combine troops. Play it smart: let the Combine cronies dish out as much damage as they can until the Myrmidont takes them down. Just hang back with a nice heavy radiator object in the grasp of your gravity gun. When the troops are dead, the Myrmidont will focus its attention on you. Try to keep a support column between you and the beastie. This way, the Myrmidont will stun itself by charging into the pillar. (The creature's charge will also knock down the column, letting you use the rubble as gravity-gun ammo.)

The first time you use sentry guns for defense, you can block the stairways with debris. This will tie up Combine troops long enough for the automated gun to cut them to ribbons.

PRISON FIGHT

Here's one of the toughest segments in the entire game. In the Nova Prospekt prison you'll get to an area shaped like two "H's" stacked on top of each other. You'll have three sentry guns, an HEV and health recharger, and plenty of ammo. Alyx will tell you to hold the room until she gets there. You'll be in for a six-minute firefight against wave after wave of Combine soldiers.

The key here is sentry-gun placement. First of all, you should save right before you hit the button that unlocks the sentry guns. Now, for descriptive purposes, let's say that the wall with the rechargers on it is the north. So the hall to the right of the rechargers is the east side and the hall to the left is the west. You'll want to make your stand in the *west* side. This positioning is vital because on the east side is a balcony that Combine soldiers can use to hit you from above.

Now you'll want to set up a three-point defense with your guns. Place one gun in the hall with the rechargers. Make sure the

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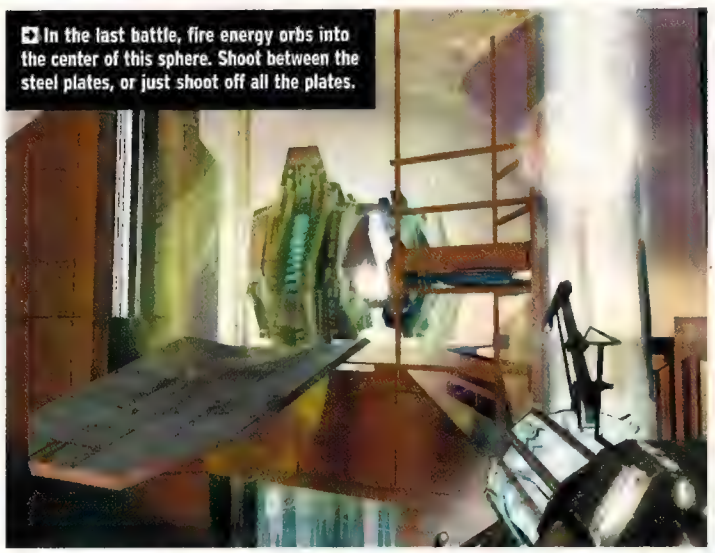
Bringing along an extra sentry gun can be a huge help in the desperate six-minute standoff in Nova Prospekt's prison.



In the last battle, fire energy orbs into the center of this sphere. Shoot between the steel plates, or just shoot off all the plates.

When advancing on the suppression device, save your sprint bar until after you see the glow.

gun is facing east. Place another gun so that it covers the shield-barrier entrance to the north. Place the last gun so that it covers the south; place it behind the hallway with the ammo so that it can cut down soldiers that come in from the south and from the east.

You'll have to deal with *many* waves of troops. And your guns will most likely be knocked down. If that happens, make it your top priority to get them back up. Later on in the battle, manhacks will show up. Use your gravity gun to dispatch them. Also, get used to hitting "G" to bring up your gravity gun. This way, you can quickly get rid of any grenades thrown your way.

If you're still having trouble, here's another tip: You can actually carry a sentry gun from an early part of the game all the way to this room. Having a fourth sentry gun can make a world of difference: you'll now have one sentry gun covering every hallway.

There are other ways of surviving this harrowing battle, but this method is the one that most consistently worked for us.

GENERATOR PLAZA

While you're fighting through the streets of City 17 with your rebel friends, you'll come to a segment where you must defend Alyx while she hacks into a generator. The Combine will attack from one of two alleyways — one to the left and one to the right. Near the terminal that Alyx is hacking are health and HEV-suit rechargers. A few Hopper mines are around as well. Put these to good use: place one by some debris near the cybercafé, another on the cobblestone path that leads to the generator, and another by the large dumpster at the bottom of the inclined alley.

Once the fighting starts, it won't let up. Prioritize your targets. Whenever possible, go after the white-clad Combine Elite troops first: They'll drop ammo for the secondary-fire mode on your pulse rifle, which is very handy for taking out groups of baddies at once.

Here's a handy tip: the amount of enemy reinforcements that arrive is dependent on how many enemies you kill. Basically, the more effective you are at killing, the more bad guys will be thrown at you. So instead of bringing death to everyone you see, you can let your AI buddies do the brunt of the fighting and kill only those bad guys that are direct threats to your buddies or Alyx.

When Alyx says that the core is exposed, equip your gravity gun and shoot the glowing core right away. Then run through the newly opened doorway. Forget about your AI buddies and forget about clearing the area of bad guys. Just run.

STRIDER, STRIDER, BURNING BRIGHT

Toward the tail end of the "Follow Freeman" chapter, you'll end up on the upper floors of a ruined building and have to take down not one, not two, but *three* Striders. On the lower level of the building is a crate with infinite rockets and rechargers for both health and your HEV suit. The key here is not to bite off more than you can chew. Just attack one Strider at a time. If you do this, the other Striders will leave you alone.

TAKING DOWN THE MAN

This is it: the last battle. Breen is about to get away and you're the only person who can stop him. For starters, get your jumping down pat. You're going to have to stay ahead of Breen. You'll work your way counterclockwise around the room and up as you go from conduit to conduit. Use your gravity gun to suck up the energy balls in the conduits before attempting to go through them. Use these orbs to take out the Combine soldiers in your way. Remember, if you run out of cover, you can always use the body of a fallen Combine soldier as a shield. Eventually you'll make your way to the top of the Citadel. Gunships will fly in and attack you. Use the energy orbs to take them down if you want, or just focus on the fusion reactor core in the center of the room. Take cover when the gunships open up, and then grab an energy orb and fling it into the reactor. After a few hits, metal plates appear to shield it. Remember *TRON*? Hit the plates away with your energy orbs. You don't have to hit them all — just make a big enough hole so that you can get to the glowing center of the reactor again. Now just keep hitting it until it blows.

WITH GUEST APPEARANCES BY...

The G-Man pops up throughout the game, and while he may make your trigger-finger itch, shooting at him is just a waste of ammo. Here are some places where you'll see him.

IN CHAPTER 2: RED LETTER DAY, you'll see creepy Mr. Blue Suit on one of the screens in Dr. Cleiner's lab.

LONE VORTIGAUNT

At the very end of the airboat segment, after you've fought off the attack chopper, you'll see a canyon wall with two sewer tunnels. The opening to one of them is ajar. If you back up your airboat to it, you can use the vehicle to climb into the open tunnel. Be careful: it's full of toxic waste. Sprint down the tub and turn left at the end. You'll find a Vortigaunt there grilling up some tasty treats. He's got plenty to say to you, so sit down for a spell.

To get to the goodies that the lambda sign points to, just hop on the car, ride it up, and jump over the fence. Secrets be found!

IN CHAPTER 3: ROUTE CANAL, when you fall inside a red train carriage that holds a resistance fighter and a Vortigaunt, you'll see his boney kisser on the TV.

IN CHAPTER 4: WATER HAZARD, the G-Man appears on a pier in front of Station 7. You'll see him standing by some white rails, near the start of the airboat levels.

He'll appear once again in Chapter 4 on a giant vertical screen hanging off of a tall building.

And you'll see him one more time standing by some white railing on a bridge above you in the Water Hazard section, soon after you get the gun mounted on your airboat.

After you defeat the attack chopper in your boat, you'll see the G-Man standing on a concrete dam in the distance.

IN CHAPTER 5: WE DON'T GO TO RAVENHOLM, you'll spot the G-Man walking along the train tracks toward a large tunnel. This is after you escape Ravenholm and tackle the snipers.

On one of the many stops you make while driving along the coast in your buggy, you'll come across a point where you can look at a group of resistance fighters across the bay. If you zoom in on one of the houses, you'll see the G-Man speaking with a resistance fighter on one of the upper floors.

IN CHAPTER 9: NOVA PROSPEKT, he'll appear on one of the channels on the Combine monitors in an office in the prison.

IN CHAPTER 11: ANTI-CITIZEN ONE, after Dog lets you in past the Citadel wall, the G-Man will appear on an old television set sitting on the floor in a blown-out apartment building.

Also, while this may not exactly count, the G-Man will appear from time to time on the game's title screen. Just watch. You'll see.

TRICK SHOOTING

It's all in the physics. Thanks to the robust physics modeling in *Half-Life 2*, there are more than a few creative ways to solve your Combine problems. Here are some down-and-dirty tips in this month's episode of *Playing With Physics*:

When you're in Ravenholm, you'll see more than a few blades attached to motors. Sure, you can turn them on, but all the "cool" physicists just hit them with the gravity gun to make them spin. It's just as effective and it's more environmentally sound.

You don't have to pick up an object to hurt an enemy. Sometimes it's just as effective to "punt" something into a baddie. It's also quicker.

Don't forget that power-up items such as medkits and power packs for your HEV suit can all be grabbed by your gravity gun. So if you see some goodies just out of reach, you know what to do.

The easiest way to dispatch manhacks is with your gravity gun: it'll suck those suckers right in. Then it's only a mater of firing them into a wall. You can also launch them against enemies. Bonus!

Later on in the game, Combine troops will start using the secondary fire on their pulse rifles to fire energy orbs at you. You can actually use your gravity gun to catch these powerful spheres of energy and fling them right back where they came from.

See a bunch of crates behind bars that can't be reached? Pick them up with your gravity gun and fling them against a nearby wall

CONTINUED ON PAGE 102

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HALF-LIFE 2 STRATEGY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 101

to reveal the goodies inside. Use your gravity gun to pull said goodies straight into your waiting hands.

- This isn't really a physics tip, but it's still handy: If you have full health and have plenty of medkits around you, use your gravity gun to fling the kits to areas farther along the level, such as down a long hallway or up a stairwell. Chances are you'll need them by the time you get there, and the kits will stay put wherever they land.

- You don't need to replace a bounce-bomb back on the ground once you've picked it up. If you're in a hurry and there's a target nearby, use one of these hopping landmines as an explosive projectile.

- After your gravity-gun training session with Dog, you can take his "ball" with you. It actually makes for a very handy weapon because it rolls back to you every time you use it. Also, enemies will attack it, so it makes a nifty decoy.

- This may seem like a no-brainer, but if you line up a group of enemies, you can take them all out at once with the right projectile.

- Another tip that's not exactly gravity gun-related: If you throw your Antlion bugbait at a Combine soldier, it'll actually stun him. It's the next best thing to a canister of pepper spray.

- Once you get to the prison, you'll have access to reprogrammed sentry guns. As it turns out, these guns will still fire while you're holding onto them with your gravity gun. Furthermore, as long as you're holding onto them, they can't be knocked over. Also, you can poke them around walls to fire upon enemies, all while remaining safely behind cover.

- Don't forget that enemy grenades can very easily become *your* grenades. If a Combine soldier lobs a frag at you, just boot it back at him with your primary fire. Or you can pick it up and send it elsewhere. Just do it quickly.

- Rollermines are especially pesky buggers: They can deal serious damage and can take a lot of punishment. The best way to get rid of them is to suck them in with your gravity gun and then punt them into the ocean.

- Toward the end of the game, you'll get to the point where you can grab energy balls with your gravity gun. These balls don't have to be one-time-use weapons. After using one to dispatch a baddie, you call it back and launch it again. If you time it right, you can use it like a yo-yo...a yo-yo of death!

VIVA LA REVOLUCIÓN!

Throughout the game you'll find secret areas marked by the now-famous lambda sign (λ). They're far too numerous to list here, so just keep an eye out for them. Whenever you see one, you can be sure that some hidden goodies are stashed nearby. If not, then the sign is there to serve as either an indicator of which direction to go or as a clue for solving puzzles.

— LI C. KUO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS STRATEGY

ADVERTISER INDEX

COMPANY	PRODUCT	PAGE #
ABS PC	ABS PC	66-67
Academy of Art University	Academy of Art	103
Alienware Corp.	Alienware PC Systems	6-7
ATI Technologies, Inc.	DragonShard	IBC
CompuExpert	GoGamer	102
Cyberpower	Cyberpower	87, 90-91
Electronic Arts	Battlefield 2	14-15
Electronics Boutique	Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich	43
Electronics Boutique	Battlefield 2/Sims 2 XP/NASCAR 2005	55
Electronics Boutique	Vampire: Bloodlines	63
Electronics Boutique	Close Combat: First to Fight	73
Full Sail	Full Sail Real-World Education	102
Groove Games	Pariah	50-51
ibuypower Computer	ibuypower	83-85
LucasArts Entertainment Comp.	Knights of the Old Republic II	8-9
Matrix Games	World at War	77
Microsoft	Plays for Sure	69
Mythic Entertainment	Dark Age of Camelot	20-21
NC Interactive	City of Heroes	OBC
NC Interactive	Guild Wars	22-23
PlanetComputers.com, Inc.	PlanetComputers.com	59, 61
ProStar Computer	ProStar Computers	81
SEGA of America	The Matrix Online	34-35
Shuttle Computers	Shuttle Computers	65
Sony Online Entertainment	EverQuest II	17
Take 2 Interactive	Close Combat: First to Fight	29
THQ	The Punisher	56-57
THQ Wireless	Midway Arcade Classics	47
Ubisoft	Brothers in Arms	11-13
University of Advancing Technology	UAT	53
Vicious PC	Vicious PC	79
Vivendi Universal Games	Half-Life 2	55
Vivendi Universal Games/Blizzard	World of Warcraft	IFC
Vivendi Universal Games/Blizzard	World of Warcraft and NVIDIA	4-5
Wal-Mart	Wal-Mart	19

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Gary Whitta

POWNED

We challenged someone to top *Doom 3*. Cue Valve...

What can I say? Mere words seem so hollow, so inadequate. And in any case, there's really only one word that's appropriate.

Ownage.

On behalf of *PC Gamer*, I'd like to formally apologize for ever giving the impression that *Doom 3* is even remotely as good as *Half-Life 2*. In comparing the scores recently given (94% for *Doom 3*, 98% for *Half-Life 2*), you could be forgiven for thinking that the two games are alike in quality. But to suggest that *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2* are only four percentage points apart is like saying that taking a really satisfying bowel movement is only 4 percent worse than Pamela Anderson coming over to your place to play "Santa Claus vs. the Naughty Blond Elf."

This is not to say that *Doom 3* isn't a great game. After bashing it somewhat in a column a few months ago, I've mellowed on it, and I'd say that it's definitely a stellar game, maybe even pushing 90%. But 94%? Not knowing what I know now. While the powers that be at *PCG* may have thought so at the time, the distinction has now been thrown into sharp relief by *Half-Life 2* and its many and varied lessons in what is truly possible in a first-person shooter. The achingly beautiful visuals, the incredible sense of atmosphere, the sumptuous storytelling, the nerve-shredding combat and set-pieces — it's everything *Half-Life* was and so much more.

I want to say a few words about the physics — which, while mind-bogglingly impressive in their own right, also represent possibly the single greatest leap forward in FPS game design since I-don't-know-when. Even in its first few hours, *HL2* challenged me with more varied and original puzzles than in the last five FPSs I've played combined. The ability to treat objects as "real" totally redefines how you think about environmental challenges. Plus, dropping cars onto headcrab zombies never gets old.

But perhaps the single greatest indicator of *Half-Life 2*'s all-encompassing superiority over *Doom 3* is just how damn creepy it is. The Ravenholm areas are genuinely hair-raising, and it was while dealing with the myriad ways in which the game conspires to give you a mild heart attack that I hit upon a realization: *Half-Life 2 is scarier than Doom 3*. The one thing that *Doom 3* concentrated on doing above all else, and *Half-Life 2* beats it at its own game comprehensively, all the while doing about 25 other things brilliantly, too. This, folks, is what Gaming Goodness™ is all about.

During my time as editor-in-chief of *PCG*, I presided over the Top 50 Games of All Time issue in which *Half-Life* was first crowned Best PC Game Ever (November 1999). It was still atop that lofty perch when the list was recompiled (October 2001). It will not be next year, and it's only fitting that it will be toppled by its own sequel. You read it here first.

PC GAMER
02.05

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Nathan Gale, a wasted life. Shot dead by a police officer after killing *my* guitar hero, Dimebag Darrell — *my* inspiration for picking up the guitar all those years ago. I remember sitting in my car with an Ibanez guitar, early on a summer Saturday, waiting for my friend Ben to come downstairs so that we could go skate in Berkeley. But I had other things on my mind. I wanted to learn the intro to "This Love," which, as a young guitarist, I was having trouble with. I'll never forget how great it felt once I'd nailed that lick. Rest in peace, Dime.

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